The New Criterion

January 1995

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Notes & Comments: January 1995

Downward with the "Times," I

The editorial pages of *The New York Times* have been working overtime lately to keep one's sense of amazement in top form. We were reminded of this again on November 28 when Brent Staples, the resident black militant on the editorial board of the *Times*, published an "Editorial Notebook" denouncing the philosopher Leo Strauss for spreading the gospel of anti-democratic elitism. We recommend sitting down before reading the piece. As an example of what happens when ignorance joins forces with demagogic rage it is hard to beat. Mr. Staples begins by asking "What caused the Holocaust? Was it Fascism . . . ? Was it that Germanic fixation on racial superiority and 'purity'? Or was it the Enlightenment and those dirty rotten idealists, Hobbes, Rousseau, Franklin and Jefferson? Blame the Enlightenment and you've chosen the right villain—at least in the eyes of Leo Strauss."

Our unofficial poll suggests that the typical reponse to Mr. Staples expostulation, at least among those who are actually acquainted with Strauss's thought, begins in puzzled incredulity and moves on quickly to indignant outrage. Strauss, a Jewish refugee from Hitler's Reich, taught at the University of Chicago for many years. By the time of his death, in 1973, he had become one of the most beloved and influential teachers of his generation. Mr. Staples himself attended the University of Chicago—it's a rare Staples column that doesn't mention the fact, and, sure enough, we learn in this piece that he "began . . . doctoral studies" there in 1973. It happens, though, that Mr. Staples never studied with Strauss or his students. Nor is it clear that he has ever read Strauss: he acknowledged elsewhere that his notions of what Strauss stood for came largely from attacks on his thought that appeared in *The New York Review of Books* and the *Times Literary Supplement*.

Mr. Staples writes that "Strauss's students had to gasp when he said that Hitler had sprung full blown from the Enlightenment presumptions that all people were created equal and that society was better governed by reason than slavish devotion to tradition." No doubt they would have gasped—had Strauss said any such thing. But these sentiments are completely at odds with Strauss's published works, and Mr. Staples offers no evidence whatever for ascribing the idea that "Hitler had sprung full blown from the Enlightenment" to Strauss's teaching. Indeed, blatant misrepresentation seems to have become a Staples speciality. Many readers will remember his intemperate attack on the novelist Saul Bellow in *The New York Times Magazine* last year. Mr. Staples never studied with Bellow, either—but that did not pre-

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vent him from denouncing Bellow, too, as an elitist and worse.

In his article on Strauss, Mr. Staples graduates to outright fabrication. "Leo Strauss contended that the Philosopher Kings (himself included) were born to rule, servants were born to serve and that only disaster came of letting the rabble get above its station." Where in Strauss's corpus is this contention to be found? Mr. Staples doesn't say—for the simple reason that his assertion is pure fantasy. On the contrary, Strauss believed that liberal education, which teaches us to listen to what "the greatest minds" have to say, is necessarily "a training in the highest form of modesty, not to say of humility"—hardly appropriate training for Mr. Staples's cartoon version of a Philosopher King. Mr. Staples insists that "Strauss . . . was unapologetically elitist and antidemocratic." Hence his note of alarm when he warns readers of the *Times* that Strauss's ideas "have crept into vogue in American politics." But in fact, Strauss was a passionate partisan of liberal democracy, believing it to be "the only decent and just alternative available to modern man."

These last words are from a tribute to Strauss written by the late Allan Bloom, author of *The Closing of the American Mind* and a close student of Strauss's work. Mr. Staples asserts that "Strauss appealed to the conservative elite because he viewed the status quo as an expression of divine will." More or less the opposite is the case: Strauss, like many of his students, devoted himself to the question of what constituted the best political regime precisely because he believed that the status quo was deficient. But mentioning "the conservative elite" is Mr. Staples's entrée to attacking a handful of prominent students of Strauss's thought: Allan Bloom (who for several years has been a favorite target of the adolescent Left), the social commentator Thomas Sowell, and Judge Robert Bork, another favorite target of left-wing animus. Mr. Staples also attacks in passing the late William A. Henry, III—not that Henry was influenced by Strauss. He wasn't. And he was a liberal to boot. But he did have the temerity to write the recent bestseller *In Defense of Elitism*, which for Mr. Staples makes him a kind of honorary Straussian—in other words, a "conservative," that is, an evil man.

Which is worse, Mr. Staples's ignorance? or his malice? He writes of *The Closing of the American Mind* that it "offers the vantage point of the Philosopher King staring down his nose at the commoners." But anyone who has bothered to look into that book knows that Mr. Staples's characterization is a kind of intellectual libel. In the preface to *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bloom noted that any real teacher will recognize that his primary task is to assist his students to "fulfill human nature against all the deforming forces of convention and prejudice." Only a very common intelligence indeed could come away from Bloom's profound meditation on the fate of that task in our troubled times with Staples's vulgar notion of its governing spirit. Mr. Staples's entire commentary reads like a garbled transcript from a parallel universe: the names are the same but the thoughts are unrecognizable.

But it is when he comes to his peroration that he really skids off into political never-never land. "Once it was taken as common sense that good influences transformed wayward children into good citizens. These days, it is just as common to hear it asserted that prison and the death penalty are the only crime prevention. Lurking here is the presumption that criminals are born, not made. Why not fry them at the outset, *before* they break the law?" Is there a single true statement in this list of hyperboles? Mr. Staples does not explicitly attribute these grotesque ideas to any particular individuals, but he builds up a pattern of association that leaves the reader in no doubt about whom

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he has in mind. The "dark view of human potential" he conjured is, he writes, "poised to become a central feature of this country's social policy." Translated into normal English, this means that the stunning Republican victory last November is a harbinger of social and moral catastrophe.

The "antidote" that Mr. Staples offers for these manifold evils is a "fresh and frequent reading of the Declaration of Independence." Always a laudable prescription, to be sure—and one that Leo Strauss would certainly have endorsed, even if he would have been dubious about the rhetorical panic that led Mr. Staples to recommend it. But when he is not turning over the pages of the Declaration of Independence, Mr. Staples may wish to look into the writings of Leo Strauss. We are thinking in particular of Strauss's essay "What Is Liberal Education?" Noting that the word "culture" comes from the Latin *cultura*, which means first of all a tilling or cultivation of the ground, Strauss writes that "if we contrast the present-day usage of 'culture' with the original meaning, it is as if someone would say that the cultivation of a garden may consist of the garden's being littered with empty cans and whisky bottles and used papers of various descriptions thrown around the garden at random." Brent Staples's rant is part of the noxious harvest of the blighted, anti-cultural landscape that Strauss laments.

Downward with the "Times," II

It has been observed that as long as one can say "This is the worst," something worse may yet appear. These days, it sometimes seems that *The New York Times* has set out specially to illustrate the truth of this bit of folk wisdom. Brent Staples's ignorant outburst about Leo Strauss was low, very low. But was it the absolute nadir? We found ourselves asking this on December 11 when we opened the *Times* and found an unsigned editorial called "In Praise of the Counterculture." It was an unpleasant way to start off a Sunday.

One thing is certain: the Republican landslide in November has deeply shaken the editorial staff of the *Times*. We remember hearing about the reporter who, back when Richard Nixon was first elected, was in a state of shock: "How could he have been elected?" she asked. "I don't know a single person who voted for him." Yes. Well. And so it is now. Just about the first thing that Newt Gingrich did after the November rout was to criticize the counterculture bequeathed to us by the Sixties. The editorial staff at the *Times* could not believe their ears. Everyone they know is a spiritual child of the Sixties. What sort of Neanderthal would dare to criticize that glorious decade and the hedonistic, anti-establishment culture it spawned?

Spluttering about "an excess of Republican triumphalism" (but exactly how much "triumphalism," we wondered, would the *Times* wish to allow Republicans?), the writer of this splendid effusion told readers that "the party's new leaders have decided to make 'counterculture' into a pejorative." Which seems to us more or less like saying that the party's leaders have decided to make the nighttime dark. To hear the *Times* tell it, the 1960s and 1970s marked an American Renaissance: the shackles of tyranny had at last been thrown off, love and freedom and creativity blossomed: the lark was on the wing, God was in his heaven—well, perhaps not *God*: that's who folks like Ronald Reagan are always talking about—and all was right with the world.

We think this sounds ridiculous, too. But that, apparently, is what the editors of *The New York Times* believe or profess to believe. Item: "Only a few periods in American history have seen such a rich fulfillment of the informing ideals of personal freedom and creativity that lie at the heart of the American intellectual tradition." Again: "The 60s

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spawned a new morality-based politics that emphasized the individual's repsonsibility to speak out against injustice and corruption." And once more: the counterculture "was a repudiation of the blind obedience and reflexive cynicism of politics as usual."

Gee. Where *were* we when this spasm of virtue took hold of the country? We thought that the Sixties were about drug abuse, the breakdown of the family, the ruin of the inner city, renewed racical and ethnic conflict, the degradation of popular culture, the wholesale attack on intellectual and artistic standards, the decline of public schools, sexual license, widespread anti-Americanism, and a generalized ethos of entitlement that has been the ruin of countless individuals and a crippling burden on the public purse. That, anyway, is a list of some of the things we remember.

The *Times* says that the "excesses" of the counterculture are easy to parody. Actually, they're not, because any absurdity that one might offer by way of parody is almost certain to have been eclipsed by some kindred absurdity in real life. In any event, it's hard to know just what would constitute "excess" for the editors of the *Times*, since it is precisely the excesses of the counterculture that so beguile them. Beguile them to such an extent, in fact, that they they seem to have gone into an ahistorical trance. The jury is still out on what counts as the most blithering passage of the *Times*'s editorial, but we confidently put forward this cheery snippet —we were talking about the counterculture, remember: "its summery, hedonistic ethos then and now reduced modern puritans to fits of twisting discomfort. America is still close enough to the frontier experience of relentless work and danger to view any kind of fun with suspicion."

Shall we repeat that? "America is still close enough to the frontier experience of relentless work and danger to view any kind of fun with suspicion." If there were some kind of cosmic fine that could be levied against journalistic fatuousness, it ought to be imposed with treble damages for this specimen. Among other things, it is a calumny upon fun, of which, we feel called upon to inform the editors of the *Times*, there was plenty before 1968.

This was not the only instance in which the author of that editorial felt called upon to trifle with the the historical record. We are also told that the "spirit of the age, like the tactics of the antiwar movement, was shaped by the civil rights movement." But of course it was the breakdown of the civil-rights movement and its replacement by the demand for "black power" that informed the tactics of the anti-war movement on college campuses and (lest the editors of the *Times* forget) such little picnics as the Democratic Convention of 1968. (Remember the Chicago Seven?) The *Times* tells its readers that the influence of "60s individualism"—what we might prefer to call "60s narcissism" —"fostered a psychological movement" that "enabled people in emotional torment to ask for help without being stigmatized. It gave people in dead or abusive relationships permission to break out." What, were psychologists, counselors, and divorce invented in 1963, too, at the same moment when, as Philip Larkin memorably told us, sexual intercourse first arrived upon the scene?

The *Times* concludes its eulogy for the counterculture by portentously asking whether many Americans would like to return to "the dictatorship of the majority culture." We do not doubt that American society had its share of problems before the advent of the counterculture. But given a choice between the traditional liberalism of the 1950s and the tyranny of the *Times*'s politically correct radical agenda, we would not hesitate to choose the former.

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Samuel Lipman, 1934–1994

by Hilton Kramer

Samuel Lipman, who served as the publisher of *The New Criterion* from its inception in September 1982 until his death on December 17, 1994, was one of the most remarkable figures of his generation in America. He was at once an artist and an intellectual—a gifted pianist, a brilliant writer, an incisive critic, an inspiring teacher, an accomplished administrator, and, in his later years, a fiercely articulate participant in the controversies that have shaped the critical debate about the future of high culture in our tragically divided society. In each of these roles, moreover, he proved to be a man of resolute character, firm conviction, and unwavering loyalty to the high ideals that governed his life and his work.

An earlier generation knew him as a pianist. He had made his recital debut as a child prodigy in San Francisco in 1943, his New York debut at Town Hall in 1955. As he wrote in these pages in 1988: "I have spent most of my life playing the piano, performing music from Bach and Scarlatti to Olivier Messiaen and Elliott Carter." In the late Fifties, he took time off from his musical life to earn a master's degree in political science at the University of California at Berkeley, where he was a Woodrow Wilson Fellow. The musician who had studied with Darius Milhaud, Pierre Monteux, Hugo Weisgall, and Rosina Lhevinne was thus as well acquainted with the writings of Edmund Burke, John Stuart Mill, and Karl Marx as with the scores of Bach and Schoenberg, and this unusual combination of professional artistic experience and intellectual mastery was the defining characteristic of his many-sided career.

It was this rare combination of aesthetic and intellectual interests that gave his music criticism its extraordinary authority when he turned his talents to that field of endeavor in 1975 as the music critic of *Commentary*. No sooner did Sam Lipman make his debut in that role than he received what had to be for a music critic of his generation the highest accolade—the praise of the late Virgil Thomson, who in a letter to *Commentary* described his writing as "brilliant for its straightforwardness, common sense, and musical judgment." It was those same early essays in *Commentary* that led, first to my own friendship with Sam and then to our intellectual collaboration in founding *The New Criterion*. I had been brought up, so to speak, on the music criticism of B. H. Haggin and Virgil Thomson, which set a standard that nothing else in the New York musical press came close to meeting in those days. Reading *Commentary*'s new music critic, I felt at once that I was in the presence of a powerful critical intelligence, and one that was remarkably independent of and undeceived about the exaggerated claims and politically-inspired cant that was increasingly making public discussion of art and culture a dialogue of fools and ideologues. I immediately arranged to meet this new writer, who turned out to be even more interesting,

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and more formidable, too, in person than in print; and there thus began the conversations—intense, wide-ranging, at times wildly amusing, and always deeply serious—that continued for nearly twenty years until the final stages of Sam's illness brought them to an end last month.

About his specific achievement as a music critic, no one has written better than John Gross, who, upon the publication of *Music After Modernism*, Sam's first book, in 1979, observed that "His great distinction is that he is equally good at taking music on its own terms, and setting it firmly in a social and intellectual context; when he writes about it, he also addresses himself to broad cultural issues, and what he has to say is invariably penetrating and pungent. He has a fine sense of the human comedy, too; he is adept at bringing out the flavor of a musical personality, or casting a sardonic eye down the corridors of contemporary musical power."

As readers of *The New Criterion* have ample reason to know, the "broad cultural issues" that John Gross spoke of in 1979 came to occupy a more and more urgent place in Sam's writing and public speaking as the role of the federal government in cultural policy expanded, bringing in its wake both a lowering of artistic standards and an intensified politicization of the arts. His later books—*The House of Music: Art in an Era of Institutions* (1984), *Arguing for Music, Arguing for Culture* (1990), and *Music and More: Essays, 1975–1991* (1992)—provided the most trenchant examination of the implications and consequences of this melancholy development in our cultural life that any writer of the time has given us, yet these books also explored in concrete detail what was happening to the culture of classical music as a result of this political assault.

No writer of his day was better qualified than Sam Lipman to deal with these questions of art and politics as they were being translated into public policy. This was the reason why his six-year tenure on the National Council of the Arts, to which President Reagan appointed him in 1982, proved to be something of a turning-point in the history of the National Endowment for the Arts.

The National Council is the advisory body which oversees the activities of the NEA, and it is no exaggeration to suggest that few members of the Council had ever bothered to acquaint themselves with the actual workings of the NEA—not only its decisions in respect to the grant-making process but with the ideas that shaped those decisions—to the extent that Sam Lipman did. He studied the fat briefing books which the NEA bureaucracy supplied to members of the Council until he had them virtually memorized, and at the Council's meetings was always the first to raise questions about the standards of quality which the NEA observed, or failed to observe, in conferring grants from the public treasury. He angered many people by raising such questions, and as a result became the target of ferocious attacks from the cultural Left, which for many years—but especially in the administration of Jimmy Carter—had come to look upon the NEA's budget as a political entitlement.

The battles that Sam waged on the National Council proved to be decisive in one important respect, for they identified the problems—problems not only of artistic standards but of public taste and political prudence—that soon plunged the NEA into the morass of controversy that has left its credibility compromised and its future in doubt. It is not too much to say that the NEA would today enjoy a far greater degree of intellectual esteem and public support if its leadership—including its political patrons in Congress and the White House—had heeded Sam's criticisms and acted upon his recommendations. What he wrote in 1979 about the attitude of our political leaders toward the fate of high culture turned out to be as true of the Reagan and Bush administrations as it was of the Carter administration that was in office at the time:

> Here our numerous governing cadres have neither historical nor present attachments to

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> such high culture. For reasons of political convenience our leaders are willing to arrange for the transfer of public monies for artistic purposes. That they have up to this point done so with a surprising amount of disinterest is perhaps no more than a sign of their basic uninterest that makes them so eclectic in their practical decisions. Thus freed from any burden of their own tastes, they are able to preside smilingly over the gradual vulgarization of what was once a civilized glory.

It was Sam's experience on the National Council, together with what he saw happening to the culture of classical music as the mounting problems of the Eighties were turning into the runaway crises of the Nineties, that prompted his later reflections and speculations on the future of high culture in our democratic society. These reflections led him to a reconsideration of Matthew Arnold's great book on *Culture and Anarchy*. I think he took some solace from the fact that Arnold too had become an object of derision and obloquy on the cultural Left, but it was really Arnold's searching examination of what culture might ideally signify in a liberal society that caused him to make a close study of this important Victorian writer.

Sam had always been something of an intellectual prodigy, but even his closest associates were somewhat startled by the speed with which he mastered the Arnold literature and turned himself into an Arnold scholar—and all the more so, as it happened, because the later stages of that intellectual pursuit were carried out after he had entered treatment for the leukemia that brought him down last month. In that pursuit, as well as in his continuing contributions to this journal and other publications, the last years of Sam's life were a lesson in personal courage and intellectual tenacity. One of his last appointments was to the editorial committee at the Yale University Press overseeing the publication of a new series of classic texts for the purpose of—as the series is called—"Rethinking the Western Tradition." His own contribution to the series—a new edition of Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, with essays by Maurice Cowling, Gerald Graff, Steven Marcus, and himself—was published in May of 1994, when his illness was already far advanced.

What Matthew Arnold said of himself and his work in the Introduction to *Culture and Anarchy* was something that Sam Lipman himself believed with an intensity made more acute by the gravity of the historical situation in which he found himself. "I am, above all, a believer in culture," Arnold said. "Therefore I propose now to try and enquire, in the simple unsystematic way which best suits both my taste and my powers, what culture really is, what good it can do, what is our own special need of it; and I shall seek to find some plain grounds on which a faith in culture—both my own faith in it and the faith of others,—may rest securely."

This was also the task that Sam Lipman set for himself in the last years of his life—a task that we shall continue to pursue in the pages of this magazine, where he will be deeply missed for a long time to come.

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Wise, foolish, enchanting Lady Mary

by Joseph Epstein

Once, and but once, his heedless youth was bit,
And liked that dangerous thing, a female wit.
—Alexander Pope

"A passionate man," said Stendhal, "is seldom witty." Building on that aphorism, one might go on to say that a witty man is rarely handsome. A beautiful woman who, along with being witty, is also commonsensical is rarest of all. They do, however, turn up, perhaps every century or two. Such a woman was Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. She lived (1689–1762) in a cold and hard age, where beauty helped immensely, wit was a useful weapon, common sense a necessity, and only passion an embarrassment.

Lady Mary was born with every advantage, real and artificial, and a number of true disadvantages. One distinct advantage was that she was an aristocrat, the daughter of Evelyn Pierrepont, Marquis of Dorchester, afterwards Duke of Kingston. Her secure place among the well-born was a fact she never forgot, nor was she above using it against her social, if not intellectual, inferiors. Of Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, with both of whom she had had a falling out, she remarked that they were "entitled by their birth and fortune to be only a couple of link-boys"—that is, boys hired to carry torches to light the way for others.

In later years, writing to her daughter, Lady Bute, whose husband was prime minister under George II, she noted that English writers, being generally low-born themselves, attempt to "represent people of quality as the vilest and silliest part of the nation." In her own experience, she added, "the greatest examples I have known of honour and integrity has been amongst those of the highest birth and fortunes." Gardening with Italian peasants, chatting with innkeepers, befriending women in Turkish harems, Lady Mary could be charmingly old shoe, but she always kept nearby a high horse for mounting when it pleased her to do so.

As for disadvantages, the full consequences of the chief one to befall her, the loss of her mother when Lady Mary was only four years old, shall never be known. It shall never be known because she only once, in a youthful autobiography, wrote of it. Availing herself of the third-person and more than a little romantic melodrama—she was a reader of bad novels her life long—she wrote: "Her first misfortune happened in a time of life when she could not be sensible of it, though she was sufficiently so in the course of it; I mean the death of a noble Mother, whose virtue and good sense might have supported and instructed her youth." She goes on to say that this support and instruction was left to "the care of a young Father, who, tho' naturally an honest man, was abandoned to his pleasures, and (like most of those of his quality) did not think himself obliged to be very attentive to his children's education."

The other disadvantage, Lady Mary her-

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self would have maintained, was to have been brought up a woman in the age of Queen Anne. In one of her more famous mots, she wrote that "my only consolation for being of that gender, has been the assurance it gave me of never being married to any one among them." In fact, she not only made the best of having been dealt this card, but, on occasion, turned it into a trump.

The eldest of four children, alternately pampered and neglected by her father, raised by a superstitious governness, Lady Mary, at an early age, presided at her father's table, which meant, among other things, being put in charge of carving various joints of meat, the task assigned to the woman of the house. She also had the run of her father's rather impressive library, of which she made good use. She began to write poetry, and, at thirteen, she repaired to her father's library, where, with the aid of a dictionary and a grammar, she began to teach herself Latin, which she did well enough to undertake translations of Ovid and, some years later, Epictetus's *Enchiridion*, which she showed to Bishop Burnet, who is said to have been much impressed. Of her intellectual attainments, Robert Halsband, Lady Mary's biographer and editor, writes: "She tended to be a blue-stocking proud of her erudition, though she later regarded a reputation of learning as a misfortune in a woman."

Lady Mary's father was a Whig, which she herself remained all her life, and a member of the Kit-Cat Club, that London gathering place for artists, intellectuals, and aristocrats interested in politics and culture, and among his friends were Addison, Steele, and Congreve. All accounts of Lady Mary include the story of her father nominating his then not yet eight-year-old daughter as the candidate for the Club's annual beauty, to be toasted by all the members, holding that she was more beautiful than anyone else nominated that year. To make good his claim, he had the child brought to the Club, all the members agreed on her beauty, and she was declared winner and passed from lap to lap, roundly praised, and toasted straightaway.

Recounting this story, her granddaughter, Lady Louisa Stuart, reports in her "Introductory Anecdotes" to her own son's nineteenth-century edition of Lady Mary's letters: "Pleasure, she said, was too poor a word to express her sensations; they amounted to ecstasy: never again, throughout her whole future life, did she pass so happy a day." Lady Mary's father afterwards commissioned a painting of her, so that the painting itself could regularly be toasted, which it was. This was but the first of many occasions on which she would play the happy role of cynosure. Although she would in later years refer to herself in her letters as a mere "spectatress," lime was the light she bathed in most happily.

Few people can have contained within themselves more contradictory qualities than Lady Mary. She was detached and highly observant, yet loved, indeed craved, attention; she was cynical yet romantic, informal yet snobbish. "Lady Mary is one of the most extraordinary shining characters in the world," wrote the English anecdotist Joseph Spence, after meeting her in Rome; "but she shines like a comet; she is all irregular and always wandering. She is the most wise, the most imprudent; loveliest, disagreeablest; best natured, cruellest woman in the world."

In describing her conduct during her courtship by Edward Montagu Wortley, Leslie Stephen, writing in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, remarks that she showed "masculine sense rather than tenderness." Lady Mary may have been that entity for which many men are said secretly to yearn but perhaps none has ever discovered: someone with a masculine mind and a feminine body. The largely epistolary courtship between Lady Mary and Wortley was carried on, from her standpoint, as a great seduction of common sense, difficult as that may be to imagine. Her father disapproved the marriage, principally because Wortley would not agree to his insistence on an arrangement whereby all his estates would be entailed to his and Lady Mary's first-born son. Lord Dorchester, as he then was, or-

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dered his daughter to marry another man, a gentleman with the wonderfully Wodehousian moniker of Clotworthy Skeffington. Engaged to Skeffington though she formally was, she nonetheless kept up negotiations with Wortley. (Wortley's father, though named Montagu, agreed to call himself by his richer wife's family name of Wortley, a practice his son tended off and on to continue.)

"I never speak but what I mean," Lady Mary wrote to him, "and when I say I love, 'tis for ever." Wortley, from all accounts a rather humorless man and from his portraits a very handsome one, was obviously smitten. "I know how to make a man of sense happy," she wrote to him, "but then that man must resolve to contribute something toward it himself." She told Wortley that she didn't quite believe in his love. She threatened to cut off correspondence with him. When she picked it up again, she informed him that her ideal of marriage is to be found in friendship. "By friendship," she wrote, "I mean an entire communication of thoughts, wishes, interests, and pleasures, being undivided; a mutual esteem, which naturally carries with it a pleasing sweetness of conversation, and terminates in the desire of making one or another happy." Wortley, suffering jealousy and doubt, continued to waver. Lord Dorchester now really put the screws to Lady Mary about marrying Skeffington—a case, in the old-fashioned and most precise sense, of genuine peer pressure.

Finally, the deal was done. An elopement was planned; Lady Mary would be Wortley's, but without dowry. "I shall come to you," she wrote in August of 1712, "with only a night-gown and a petticoat and that is all you will get with me." Toward the close of the same letter, she adds: "'Tis something odd for a woman that brings nothing to expect anything; but after the way of my education, I dare not pretend to live but in some degree suitable to it." By which she meant that, though she may come to him a pauper, she didn't for a moment expect to live like one.

Lady Mary was twenty-three, Wortley thirty-four, when they married. In Lady Mary, Wortley got both more than he bargained for and less than she promised. Before their marriage, she had written to him: "I am determined to think as little of the rest of the world—men, women, acquaintance and relations—as if a deluge had swallowed them. I abandon all things that bear the name of pleasure but what is to be found in your company. I give up all my wishes, to be regulated by yours, and I resolve to have no other study but that of pleasing you." Could Wortley have believed this? If he did, he was not only unimaginative but a fool. His wife was inveterately the most social of beings.

Wortley was a man of some worldliness. He had the interests of a gentleman of his time in amateur scholarship, which included a fair amount of learning in foreign and ancient languages. Joseph Addison was his close friend. He was not yet rich when he married, but, a man who looked after his business, he died leaving an estate of more than £800,000, along with an annual income of £17,000 from his lands—at that time, as the old joke has it, a lot of money.

Lady Mary was peremptory and, though otherwise splendidly imaginative, was unable to imagine herself wrong. At twenty-four she wrote out a correction of *Cato*, Addison's famous play, correcting it as if it were the work of child. Addison, *mirabile dictu*, not merely accepted but acted upon many of these corrections. Such a woman was not to be set aside like a trophy or a lap dog, which Wortley, early in his marriage, attempted to do, leaving his wife—soon his wife and infant son—stranded in the country while he sat in Parliament in London. This arrangement, she made plain to him, was intolerable and, under the barrage of constant criticism, he moved her to London.

Before she married, Lady Mary, who was determined not to be a spinster, shared a secret code with her friend Philippa Mundy, in which the two young women referred to marriage to a man one loved as Paradise, to a man one detested as Hell, and to a man one

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merely tolerated at Limbo. Lady Mary's marriage all too quickly slid from Paradise to Limbo, and what caused her and Wortley's marriage to become hollow is a matter of some controversy. Those who have written about Lady Mary's life, in deciding who was responsible for the dissipation of feeling between them, have cast votes on different sides.

Marrying a genius is probably always a mistake. Those of us who are not ourselves geniuses will feel a certain sympathy for Wortley. Leigh Hunt, writing more than a century after the fact, cited Wortley's inattentiveness for the breakdown of his marriage, yet nonetheless thought "the lady, in all respects, was too much for him,—had too much fondness (if he could but have responded to it), too much vivacity of all sorts, and even too much of his favorite 'good sense.'" Joseph Walter Cove, another of Lady Mary's biographers, remarks that "husbands are not, as a rule, fond of being outshone by their wives," as Wortley clearly was by his. Yet Wortley remained steadfast, even in the long years when he and his wife were separated, she living alone in Italy and in France. During this later period, Lady Mary wrote to her daughter of Wortley that she "knew him to be more capable of a generous action than any man I ever knew."

The first of Wortley's generous actions was to give his wife, once she had moved with him to London, the widest possible berth in her own social trafficking. With her good looks, her intellectual ebullience, her eye for scandal and talent for spreading it, she took London in her early years the way Grant took Richmond—her social conquest, that is to say, was complete. Wortley, in the words of Robert Halsband, "conceded that since no one could match her intelligence, he would never contend with it."

At the court of George I, the fifty-four-year-old Hanoverian king who spoke very little English, Lady Mary throve. Positioning herself in a way that she hoped would redound to her husband's political success, she became a friend of the Princess of Wales, who would one day be Queen Caroline; the king, a man with an eye for female beauty and charm, took note of the striking Lady Mary. She took rather different, cooler note of him, later describing him thus: "The king's character may be comprised in a very few words. In private life he would have been called an honest blockhead; and fortune, that made him a king, added nothing to his happiness, only prejudiced his honesty and shortened his days." Lady Mary understood the uses and pleasures of power and thoroughly grasped that, then as now, imbeciles were frequently found in high places.

In London she not only kept up a regular social round amongst her own class, but also cultivated many of the capital's literary men: Congreve, John Gay, John Arbuthnot, the painter Charles Jervas, and, most fatefully, the brilliant little hunchback of Twickenham, Alexander Pope. She was quick-witted, perceptive and penetrating both, with a ready supply of that malice in which the age may be said to have specialized. Walter Bagehot is excellent on the social scene that Lady Mary found in London, at a time when aristocrats were undeterred in their behavior by the not-yet-invented social brake that today we call public opinion:

> The aristocracy came to town from their remote estates—where they were uncontrolled by any opinion or by any equal society, and where the eccentricities and personalities of each character were known and fostered and exaggerated—to a London which was like a large county town, in which everybody of rank knew everybody of rank, where the eccentricities of each rural potentate came into collision with the eccentricities of other rural potentates, where the most minute allusions to the peculiarities and the career of the principal persons were instantly understood, where squibs were on every table, and where satire was in the air.

All this provided a perfect field of operations for Lady Mary, with her wit and lively sense of the grotesque: she once described

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the marriage between a rheumatic woman and a man who had the use of only one arm as "curious as that between 2 oysters, and as well worthy the serious enquiry of the naturalists." She not only had the temperament necessary to satire, the reigning tone of the time, but showed a ready literary talent, being able to shape comic couplets, the chief form of the time, with such an effortless aplomb that her verse was often thought to have been composed by Pope, much to the latter's consternation. Of the Princess of Wales, who had befriended her, she wrote:

> Ah! Princess, learn'd in all the courtly arts
> To cheat our hopes, and yet to gain our hearts.

Such versifying was not published, at least not under her own name, especially by an aristocrat such as Lady Mary, in whom publication itself would have been construed as vulgar in the extreme. But it was passed round around to all the right—that is to say, the malicious-minded—people. Lady Mary was clearly among the right people—she was very much, as we should nowadays say, in the loop.

The interconnections, the intertwinings, among the social, the literary, and political in eighteenth-century England are a good part of what gives the period its brilliance and fascination. In what other period could a man such as Joseph Addison become an important secretary of state; or Edward Wortley Montagu find favor at court because he could communicate with his king in French; or Horace Walpole later hold a grudge against Lady Mary (he referred to her as "Moll Worthless") because she was a longtime friend of the woman, Molly Skerrett, who became his father's mistress and thus the enemy of his mother. How delightfully intimate this world was, how perfectly vicious!

Life, for Lady Mary, was always to be taken as it was, not as one wished it might be. In her letters, she was amusing about the vanities and foibles—especially sexual foibles—of others, but rarely was she censorious. She had a clear sense of what it took to get on in a less-than-perfectly-just world. She urged the perhaps too passive Wortley to greater heights through impudence. "'Tis necessary for the common good for an honest man to endeavor to be powerful when he can be the one without losing the first more valuable title," she wrote to her husband. Later, she added: ". . . as the world is and will be, 'tis a sort of duty to be rich, that it may be in one's power to do good, riches being another word for power, towards the obtaining of which the first necessary qualification is impudence, and (as Demosthenes said of pronunciation in oratory) the second is impudence, and the third, still impudence." She reminded her husband that every man who early attained to high place had this quality. "A moderate merit with a large share of impudence is more probable to be advanced than the greatest qualification without it."

In 1715, when she was twenty-six, Lady Mary was afflicted with small pox, which caused the loss of her eyebrows and left her skin pitted and pocked. Although she retained her large, almond-shaped eyes—without eyebrows, they took on a startled, staring quality—her slightly acquiline, slender nose that gave her face a permanent refinement, her small soft mouth with its full, slightly pouting lower lip, a great beauty was ruined by this arbitrary turn in her fortune. "I am," she later wrote, "of the opinion that it is extremely silly to submit to ill-fortune. One should pluck up the spirit, and live upon cordials when one can have no other nourishment." Yet, when she grew older, she claimed no longer to look into mirrors.

The following year, 1716, Wortley was appointed Ambassador Extraordinary to the Court of Turkey. Caught up in the most intricate diplomatic negotiations among Austria, France, Turkey, and England, Wortley, who expected his appointment to last no fewer than five years, was dismissed, at the insistence of Austria, whose diplomats thought him acting in the interest of Turkey, after little more than a year. But the trip proved the making of his wife's reputation.

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Her *Turkish Embassy Letters* along with her pioneering work in England on spreading the use of small-pox inoculation, which she had learned about in Constantinople, lifted her above being a mere clever woman to being a figure of permanent interest.

With an entourage of twenty servants in tow, Lady Mary, her husband, and child passed through Holland, Germany, Austria, Hungary, and the Balkans—with a long stop in Adrianople, where the Sultan had arranged lodgings for the new English Ambassador and his family—before arriving in Constantinople. Under conditions of early-eighteenth-century travel, the trip took roughly eight months. Lady Mary had prepared herself for this adventure by attempting to learn Turkish; in Adrianople, she went about in Turkish costume as she would later do in Constantinople. Many later portraits show her in this same get-up.

In Turkey and in the countries she visited along the way, she revealed herself an excellent ethnographer, one of the participatory kind, falling in with local customs, broadly tolerant of other ways of living, and endlessly curious about the different cultures in which she found herself. "Thus you see, my dear" she wrote to an English friend, apropos of the ritual of taking a second husband —"one that bears the name, and another that performs the duties"—at certain German courts, "gallantry and good-breeding are as different, in different climates, as morality and religion. Who have the rightest notions of both, we shall never know till the day of judgment." For a woman certain of her own judgment at home, she was splendidly broad-minded in foreign lands.

The prose pictures Lady Mary sent back from Turkey left a permanent impress on European culture: Ingres is said to have made use of her description of a Turkish harem for *Le Bain Turc*, his painting of 1862. The most carefully prepared of her literary productions, these letters were clearly composed with later, most probably posthumous, publication in mind. In their day, Smollett, Voltaire, Johnson, and Byron expressed admiration for them. Gibbon, upon finishing them, noted: "What fire, what ease, what knowledge of Europe and Asia!" Dr. Johnson is supposed to have said that Lady Mary's letters were the only book he ever read for pure pleasure.

A curious and lively mind, exercising itself in a careful style upon an exotic subject, retains an eternal interest. In her letters from Turkey, Lady Mary described the limitless power of the Turkish janissaries, who, in effect, held the Sultan and everyone else captive. She is splendid in her descriptions of Turkish women and their elaborately bedizened dress. "As to their morality or good conduct, I can say like Harlequin, 'Tis just as 'tis with you'; and the Turkish ladies don't commit one sin the less for not being Christians." Like every good writer, she knows that the larger subject of the travel writer is human nature in a fresh context, but considered in a way that never scamps the delights of cogently observed particulars. She understands, too, that one of the benefits travel confers is that of providing silken thread for spinning endless fine distinctions. She herself, we learn from her letters, prefers Italian to French music, French to English acting, and English to French women.

While in Turkey Lady Mary learned about inoculation as a defense against small pox, a disease "so fatal and so general amongst us," as she wrote to her friend Sarah Chiswell, and she claimed that she planned to allow her own son to undergo inoculation by Turkish methods. "I am patriot enough," she wrote, "to take pains to bring this useful invention into fashion in England." When the time comes to make the attempt, she predicted, she is almost certain to be opposed by English doctors, who are unlikely to have sufficient virtue "to destroy such a considerable branch of their revenue for the good of mankind, but that distemper is too beneficial to them not to expose to all their resentment the hardy wight that should undertake to put an end to it."

Four years later, in 1721, when a small-pox epidemic struck England, all that Lady Mary had prophesied turned true. When a London physician attempted to explain, in a

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pamphlet, how inoculation worked, there was an unwillingness to believe him. Lady Mary, who had already had her son inoculated, now offered her second child, a daughter born in Turkey, to be inoculated as a matter of public record. The Princess of Wales, much impressed by this, determined to widen the tests for inoculation. General interest, and soon widespread participation, in inoculation followed, so that Lady Mary was able to write to her sister: "I suppose the . . . faithful historians give you regular accounts of the growth and spreading of the inoculation of the small-pox, which is become almost a general practice, attended with great success."

Now returned to England, Lady Mary required an inoculation of another kind—that against scandal. Unfortunately, in the circles in which she traveled, none was available. She took up her turn in the elaborate dart game of insult that was the amusement of choice of the brightest figures of the age. She could cast as cold an eye as any among them. When Pope wrote some sentimental verses about two rustic lovers struck by lightning who were joined forever in eternity, Lady Mary set out, in a letter to Pope, rather a different script for their likely future; her version ends on the following lines:

> A beaten wife and cuckhold swain
> Had jointly cursed the marriage chain.
> Now they are happy in their doom,
> For Pope has wrote upon their tomb.

Life in England was far from smooth for Lady Mary. Her marriage seemed to turn permanently cold; Wortley, concentrating all his attention on business and sitting in Parliament, receded into the dim background. (She, from all reports, was technically faithful to him—that is, there is no evidence that she ever took a lover.) Her young sister died and so did her father, who, true to his word when she married against his wishes, left her nothing. Her young son began to show first signs of his lifelong delinquency by running off to sea at the age of thirteen: he would later scandalize her in various ways, and later in life became a Mohammedan. Her other sister, Lady Mar, after many signs of losing her grip, lapsed into insanity, and Lady Mary had to battle her brother-in-law for custody of her.

Earlier, acting on a tip from Pope, Lady Mary had given financial advice to a Frenchman named Rémond, who had powerfully flattered her, to invest in South Sea stock. At the bursting of the South Sea Bubble, he wanted his money back. He claimed she had duped him, and threatened to expose her to Wortley, who would not have been pleased. She was perfectly innocent, but in a society where scandal was the standard, truth was no fit defense. Besides, as Lady Mary was attracted by gossip, so quite as much did she attract it. This incident with Rémond would later be used against her by her enemies Horace Walpole and Alexander Pope.

Pope was not always her enemy. Quite the reverse. In his letters, he was rapturously in pursuit of her, so much so that she had delicately to defuse his epistolary passions by never answering them in kind. For a time, it appeared as if the two were in satirical cahoots. Not long after Lady Mary and Wortley returned from Constantinople, they acquired, along with their London place, a house in Twickenham, where Pope lived and where, as Peter Quenell writes in his life of Pope, "he had planned his gardens as a kind of decorative trap, a labyrinth of alleys and avenues in which he had hoped that Lady Mary might consent to lose her way."

And then, in a complication of ways that has never been made clear, it all exploded. The various stories set out in explanation of the break run, at the most trivial level, to Pope's once loaning Lady Mary some sheets, which she returned to him unwashed; to, in one of his versions, his unwillingness to write a satire on someone at her and her friend Lord Hervey's insistence. Some held that he harbored resentment about her criticism of his poem about the lovers caught in the thunder storm. Her granddaughter reports Lady Mary recounting to her that Pope had declared his love to her, which "in

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spite of her utmost endeavours to be angry and look grave, provoked an immoderate fit of laughter; from which moment he became her implacable enemy." (Unrequited love, to Pope, far from being a bore, was a license to kill.) Maynard Mack, Pope's excellent biographer, thinks this last story possible but unlikely. He thinks it more likely that Pope convinced himself that Lady Mary was somehow behind a number of public attacks on him, for he reported to Robert Walpole that she was blackening his own name as she one day would his.

Pope was not a good man to have as an enemy. His was the sharpest pen in England, and when he unsheathed it he intended not to wound but to kill. In the *Dunciad* as well as in other poems, Lady Mary appears as Sappho. In another of his poems, he refers to a "hapless Monsieur"—this would of course be Rémond—who

> much complains at Paris
> Of wrongs from Duchesses and Lady Maries.

Before he was done, Pope accused Lady Mary of being personally filthy, treacherous, having a venereal disease, and being a whore. In his "Imitation of the First Satire of the Second Book of Horace," he describes victims of Sappho, as "Poxed by her love, or libelled by her hate." She fired a few good shots of her own across his bow, including the following from "Verses Addressed to the Imitator of the First Satire of the Second Book of Horace":

> Then whilst with coward hand you stab a name,
> And try at least t'assassinate our fame,
> Like the first bold assassin's be thy lot,
> Ne'er be thy guilt forgiven, or forgot;
> But as thou hat'st, be hated by mankind,
> And with the emblem of thy crooked mind
> Mark's on thy back, like Cain by God's own hand,
> Wander, like him, accursed through the land.

Along with Pope's enmity, came, rather like a package deal, that of Swift and Bolingbroke. It could not have been pleasant for Lady Mary to have been the public target of some of the meanest hit men in England. Her marriage was deadened if still legally intact. She had been put through Rémond's blackmail. Her son was a permanent disappointment, her daughter made a financially disappointing marriage that she could not know would later turn out to be a politically advantageous one. England must, in every way, have seemed stale to her.

In 1740, then, Lady Mary expatriated herself, to France and to Italy, where she would remain until the final year of her life. Some have argued that she made a deal with Wortley, who felt she was disgracing him, to live abroad at his expense. A more reasonable conjecture about her abrupt flight to Europe is offered by Bagehot, who speculated: "She turned abroad, not in pursuit of definite good, nor from fear of particular evil, but from a vague wish for some great change—from a wish to escape from a life which harassed the soul, but did not calm it; which awakened the intellect without answering its questions."

Four years earlier Lady Mary had met and become infatuated with a young man named Count Francesco Algarotti. Part of her plan in departing England was to live in Italy with Algarotti. A man still in his twenties, a natural philosopher interested in Locke and Newton, who had put the latter's *Optics* in the form of a dialogue, Algarotti was a real piece of work. He was, as Robert Halsband quietly puts it, "a handsome man of great charm and androgynous tastes, capable of love affairs with either sex." Frederick II, King of Prussia, with whom Algarotti settled in for a good spell, called him "the Swan of Padua" and recalled him, in his memoirs, as "a man of taste, of gentle mind, keen, shrewd, supple, but a great wheedler, and above all very selfish." (One admires the diminution of virtue in that description.) Lady Mary was nearly twice Algarotti's age, and Robert Halsband doubts whether there was any element of sexual passion in her feelings for him. For him she was probably

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no more than, in the modern term used by gigolos, just another "old hide," or wealthy women who might prove useful.

Although they exchanged many letters and both lived in Turin at the same time, Algarotti is significant chiefly in being the last disappointment in Lady Mary's life. She lived more than twenty-two years in self-imposed exile in Italy and France, and, no longer fortified by the illusion of hope, grew more and more impressive. She lived on an allowance of £1,200, generously supplied her by Wortley, sufficient to sustain a decent margin of luxury, with enough left over to make her an interesting target for various Italian confidence men and assorted hustlers. Living alone, occasionally visited by Englishmen abroad, she lived, as she once claimed to her sister she lived in England, endeavoring "to make the world as agreeable to me as I can, which is the true philosophy; that of despising it is of no use but to hasten wrinkles."

Away from London and its school for scandal, Lady Mary became deeper in her isolation. Writing from Brescia, in Italy, she claims to be as much removed from the world as it is possible to be "this side of the grave, which is my own inclination." At her villa outside Brescia, she writes to her daughter that "I enjoy every amusement that solitude can afford." She cultivates her garden and her own mind, and, as she notes, "whoever will cultivate their own mind will find full employment."

During this portion of her life, Lady Mary is living, in effect, in a monastery of her own devising, and thinks of herself as a "lay nun," if not quite the abbess that in childhood she once imagined herself. In solitude, the world begins to fall into place for her. She comes to understand what is important—that a cook who makes a fine pudding and keeps a clean kitchen is as valuable as a genius; that a country doctor who trudges selflessly on his long rounds is a true hero. Abroad, she obtains that fine distance that goes by the name of perspective. To Lady Bute she writes: "I know now (and alas, have long known) all things in this world are almost equally trifling, and our most serious projects have scarce more foundation than those edifices that your little ones raise in cards."

As she grows older, Lady Mary believes less and less in free will. Liberty, she holds, is chimerical, and, she avers toward the end of her life to her friend Sir James Steuart, "I am afraid we are little better than straws upon the water; we flatter ourselves that we swim when the current carries us along." None of this, however, gets her in the least down. If we travail without anything like free will, so be it: "let us sing as cheerfully as we can in our impenetrable confinement and crack nuts with pleasure from the little store that is allowed us."

In her sixties, her spirit seems to deepen without her wit or energy abating. She dispensed advice to her daughter on the education of her granddaughters, raised poultry, kept bees and silk worms, taught the Italians who lived nearby to make English puddings and custards, read works both serious and frivolous in her lush garden. "Those who can laugh and be diverted with absurdities are the wisest spectators, be it of writing, actions, or people," she held. She also held —and there is no reason to disbelieve her —that "I now find by experience more sincere pleasure with my books and garden than all the flutter of a court could give me."

In 1761, at the age of seventy-two, just after the death of Wortley, she decided to return to England. "I am dragging my ragged remnant of life to England," she wrote. After an expatriation of nearly twenty-three years, she arrived in England in January 1762, was discovered to have cancer of the breast in March, and on August 21, lulled by hemlock, was swept off the board of life. "And so farewell," writes Leigh Hunt in the final paragraph of his essay, "poor, flourishing, disappointed, reconciled, wise, foolish, enchanting Lady Mary!"

Lady Mary had a second life through posthumous publication. Knowing that her daughter, Lady Bute, and her son-in-law with their aristocratic horror of publication would not be in favor of any of her works

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seeing print, on her return to England Lady Mary left a copy of her letters from Turkey with a Reverend Benjamin Sowden in Rotterdam, "to be disposed of as he thinks proper." She had to have known that he would have thought it proper to have them published, as he had already strongly suggested she do herself. The published letters were an instant success. "The publication of these letters," wrote Smollett, "will be an immortal monument to the memory of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and will show, as long as the English language endures, the sprightliness of her wit, the solidity of her judgment, the elegance of her taste, and the excellence of her real character." Although Lady Bute burned her mother's diary, she did not destroy her mother's other papers, and some forty years after Lady Mary's death a collection of her works, including the verse and the few essays she wrote under pseudonyms, was published. It added further luster to her reputation.

But it is Lady Mary's letters, chronicling fifty-four years of her life, that constitute her true achievement. When she read Madame de Sévigné's letters, she wrote to her sister, Lady Mar, that "very pretty they are, but I assert that mine will be fully as entertaining forty years hence. I advise you, then, to put none of them to the use of waste paper." Excessive humility was never Lady Mary's long suit, but in this instance, I believe, she was correct. Her letters cut through empty formality and false sentiment, from neither of which Madame de Sévigné was wholly free, and reveal a splendid healthiness of mind pondering a world it never finds devoid of interest. Within her letters one discovers literary criticism, a mother lode of novelistic material, a brilliant eye for and witty response to human foible, and an almost complete absence of depression, even when, one might have thought, depression was well warranted.

Lady Mary's letters contain little of great events, not a vast amount about famous persons, and a paucity of personal confession. They are relentlessly interesting because, as a writer, dullness was simply not available to her. As T. S. Eliot said that the best method for being a critic is to be very intelligent, so the best method for writing letters that will retain eternal interest is never to be boring. Always on the intellectual *qui vive*, she was never for a moment bored by life, the reward for which was that she was incapable of writing boringly about it. This is why, despite her many faults, for all who enjoy the grand spectacle of a lively mind in perpetual motion, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu will always be a minor classic.

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The "High Art" of Nicolas Poussin

by Karen Wilkin

Hardly anyone dares use the term "High Art" these days—not without high irony—but it's difficult to know how else to categorize works that present elevated and learned themes with great formal rigor and scrupulous evocation of the antique. Think of the stately rhythms of Corneille's verse dramas, the astringent harmonies of Charpentier's operas, and the recondite plots, drawn from mythology, of both; then think of the sober, passionate canvases of their near-contemporary, Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), and you know exactly what I mean: arcadian landscapes and scenes of ancient cities, where idealized men and women, gods and heroes, patriarchs and saints, solemnly enact remote dramas, like stage performers frozen in noble, expressive attitudes—pictures whose authority and sureness, no less than their subject matter or manner, make only the problematic phrase "High Art" seem appropriate.

Other words that such pictures call up—order, discipline, accuracy, amplitude, clarity, severity, ambition, certitude—are no less problematic these days, which may help to explain why modern audiences, reared on anxiety and uncertainty, and more comfortable with the incomplete and the ambiguous than with the indisputable, find it hard to come to terms with Poussin, however much they recognize his historical importance. The recent exhibition mounted in Paris to commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of his birth—the first Poussin retrospective since 1960—left no doubt about his pre-eminence as a painter in the grand manner, but I'm not certain that it diminished his difficulty.[1] No one could emerge from the show unconvinced that Poussin belongs among the giants of the High Baroque, a worthy colleague of his contemporaries Velázquez, Rubens, and Rembrandt, yet, at the same time, we were reminded that he was also a contemporary of the formidable Cardinal Richelieu. The exhibition made it clear that Poussin was a disciple of the cool, rational Apollo, not the exuberant Dionysus. His work, like that of Corneille, embodies the side of seventeenth-century taste that manifests itself not in flamboyant irregularities and lush sensuality but in measured austerity. Poussin is a classicist for whom the aesthetic values of antiquity represent not only a formal ideal but also a moral imperative, a way of conceiving of form that cannot be separated from the good and the true. No matter what his nominal subject matter, whether depicting Old Testament stories, lives of the saints, the Christian sacraments,

1 "Nicolas Poussin" was on view at the Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, from September 27, 1994, through January 2, 1995. An abbreviated version of the show can be seen at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, from January 19 through April 9, 1995. A catalogue, by Pierre Rosenberg and Louis-Antoine Prat, has been published by the Réunion des Musées Nationaux (558 pages, 350 FF paper).

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or the legends of the Olympian gods, Poussin uses the same disciplined pictorial language—a kind of Roman republican virtue made visible—whose moral subtext was immediately apparent to his contemporaries but is less accessible to present-day viewers. I suspect, too, that in the seventeenth century, Poussin's disciplined approach did not obscure the underlying sensuality of his painting—the beauty of his protagonists, the fullness of his modeling, the poetry of his light, in short, the persuasiveness of his conception of an ideal world—but twentieth-century eyes have more trouble with this. The most frequent response, when I've described my enthusiasm and admiration for the show and its subject, has been, "but Poussin is so cold."

Part of the present-day difficulty with Poussin has to do, I think, not with the intrinsic character of his work but with his legacy. He virtually invented Academic painting, or rather, his paintings embody the Academic ideal, *avant la lettre*, so it's almost impossible to see them without thinking of the well-intentioned, immensely competent, dead pictures that followed. We shouldn't hold the gradual debasement of the Academy against Poussin. It's not his fault that the earmarks of his preferences—references to the antique; firm, accurate drawing and modeling; revelations of innate geometric order—were transformed, by the nineteenth century, into a set of rigid prescriptions, nor is it his fault that most of the Academy-trained artists who strove to emulate his approach had none of his native ability. Of course, it's also obvious that Poussin's heirs include not only Academy hacks but also first-rate painters, even some whose aspirations were seemingly at odds with his—arch-Romantics, such as Delacroix and Géricault, for example. In Poussin's scenes of plague and warfare, especially, we keep recognizing agonized figures known to us from their later incarnations in *Massacre at Scio* or *The Raft of the Medusa*; Géricault even seems to have learned a lot about landscape painting from Poussin, as well. (Modernist masters were no less influenced, but more about that later.) What became a recipe was, for Poussin, still alive and provocative. No matter how absolute and immutable the final composition, no matter how essential every pose and gesture, his best pictures retain a sense of discovery and invention.

The exhibition's magnificent selection of drawings bore this out, by allowing us to follow the evolution of such celebrated paintings as the Louvre's 1637 version of *The Rape of the Sabines*—the Metropolitan's version, not in the Paris show, is slightly earlier—or *Moses Striking the Rock* (1649, the Hermitage, St. Petersburg). In the rapid, vigorous drawings for these paintings, and for others, including the Vatican Museum's *Martyrdom of St. Erasmus* (1628–29), we can watch Poussin test variations of his compositions, as he shifts the positions and relations of figures in a quest for greater and greater clarity and expressiveness. The supine, tortured figure of St. Erasmus, for example, is moved farther and farther downstage, until he spills toward the edge of the canvas, turning us into horrified witnesses to the saint's ordeal. Still other drawings attest to Poussin's willingness to treat even the Greco-Roman models that he studied so thoroughly with similar freedom; images that at first glance seem to be classical reliefs soon reveal themselves to be evocative reinventions, not copies of something pre-existing. And if we required further evidence of the painter's resistance to formulae, there are the two great series of the Sacraments, each following the same distinctive iconography, but newly conceived and substantially different in the second version, executed a few years later. In the Paris installation, we could not only compare Poussin's two series, hung opposite each other in a single gallery, but follow his search for intensified dramatizations of the rites of baptism, marriage, extreme unction, and the like, in a group of drawings relating to the later series; with their broad patches of tone establishing bulk and carving out space, their rapid pen lines providing minimal but essential details, these warm, sepia-toned studies are a vivid

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record of alternatives explored and rejected in a search for an absolute.

Even at his most authoritative and high-minded, even at his most "antique," Poussin almost never descends into the glacial immobility or the self-conscious "archeological correctness" of his aesthetic progeny. (When he comes close, it's usually disastrous.) At his best, he's never, for example, as icy as David, never as meticulous as Ingres, never as static as Puvis de Chavannes. What "saves" Poussin, and helps to make his work so fascinating and compelling, is that he appears to have looked just as hard at Italian painting as he did at antiquities. Almost nothing is known about Poussin before he was thirty, but what is certain is that he was in Rome by 1624 and remained there until his death, at age seventy-one, except for a brief return to France between 1640 and 1642. (He didn't like the climate, missed Italy, disliked the process of executing the large commission assigned to him—the decoration of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre—and used ill health as an excuse to return to Rome as soon as possible.) It's generally agreed that the young Poussin, on his way to Rome for the first time, stopped a while in Venice, and if we rely on the evidence of his paintings, it's clear that Venetian painting, particularly Titian, had as much impact on him as the sources he continued to study in his adopted city, Roman sculptures and the paintings of Raphael.

Poussin's early paintings, such as the ravishing *Shepherds of Arcadia* (Chatsworth), the idyllic *Andrians*, the seductive *Echo and Narcissus* (both Musée du Louvre)—in fact, virtually all of the mythological scenes of the late 1620s—owe an enormous debt to the Venetians. The golden light, the blurred landscapes and luminous skies, the full-fleshed, softly modeled gods and mortals, the warm, radiant color all testify to how much the young French painter learned from Titian and his circle. Raphael soon replaced Titian in Poussin's pantheon—there are obvious homages to Raphael's Vatican frescos and to his Galatea in the Farnesina—but a warming trace of the Venetian *maniera moderna* endured, perhaps most visibly in the Louvre's astonishing landscape series, *The Seasons*, from the very end of his life. Poussin seems to have looked carefully, too, at the work of artists closer to his own generation, the Caracci and Domenichino, for example; but whatever his sources, his deep engagement with painting as painting is obvious. It's what redeems even his most Northern, hard-edged pictures, and keeps even his most rigidly composed, most geometrically ordered compositions from looking, as so many of his later admirers' paintings do, like Roman reliefs tricked out in color.

Poussin has often been described as a "peintre-philosophe," a lofty notion that helps both to define his intentions and to account for why his paintings seem so demanding. They refuse to declare themselves quickly, rarely hitting us all at once with a single, indelible image. There are exceptions, of course, mostly among the large-scale figure groups of the early years: the astonishing *Massacre of the Innocents* (Musée Conde, Chantilly), for example, with its desperate mother, arms stretched in a vain effort to restrain the soldier wielding a murderous sword. Or the ravishing *Rinaldo and Armida* (Dulwich Picture Gallery), an "inversion" of *Massacre of the Innocents* in which the extended female arm becomes an embrace, the sword remains sheathed and lies beside the relaxed, sleeping soldier. Or the gruesome *Martyrdom of St. Erasmus*, a graphic demonstration of how to disembowel a saint that keeps reminding me of Caravaggio, even though I know that Poussin's aspirations toward the ideal ran completely counter to Caravaggio's brute realism.

Early pictures such as these—and the lyrical mythological scenes of the same period—are among Poussin's most powerful and appealing works, but they are, in many ways, atypical in their concentrated immediacy. More usually, we must read Poussin's dense, complex images sequentially, incident by incident, if we are to be fully engaged. It takes effort and dedicated attention. Often a

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single grouping, a single exchange of gestures will capture our attention, but it must then be abandoned, if we are to penetrate deeper into the tale Poussin is telling. Nothing is unimportant. Nothing is included by chance or caprice. Every detail, every gesture, every exchange of glances counts. Even in the most apparently straightforward of Poussin's mature pictures, this complexity obtains. Erwin Panofsky's celebrated essay on Poussin has unpacked the various readings of the economical second version of *Shepherds of Arcadia* (*c.* 1640, Musée du Louvre)—the one where three men, one noticeably older than the others, read the inscription "et in arcadia ego" on a tomb, while a woman standing beside them seems to meditate on its meaning. Panofsky discusses the way each figure embodies a different moment of understanding, a different reaction to the message, and reminds us that "I, too, am in Arcadia" may not refer only to the occupant of the tomb's former place among the living in the pastoral, edenic world of classical poetry, but to the presence of death itself.

Frequently, in his mature pictures, the *peintre-philosophe* presents us with several aspects of a theme in one painting, shifts in the relationships of his figures that carry the story through time, as we read the depicted incidents across the surface of the canvas: first this happened, and then this, and then this. It's utterly absorbing, like listening to a good storyteller, but in the best pictures of this type, such as the Louvre's *Israelites Gathering Manna in the Desert* (*c.* 1639), we are most fascinated not by Poussin's immense gift for depiction but by his gift for finding purely visual means of conveying his narratives through inventive attitudes, eloquent gestures, and telling intervals.

The Parisians seemed oddly indifferent to the Poussin show. A retrospective of the second-string Impressionist Gustave Caillebotte attracted larger crowds. "We don't know Caillebotte," my friends explained, "but we know *all* about Poussin." It's true that very few of Caillebotte's pictures have been seen in France—most are in American museums or private collections—but I'm not sure that even a veteran of the French school system's obligatory cultural outings would fail to find surprises in the Poussin retrospective. Rare possibilities for direct comparison, such as the side-by-side hanging of three early pictures, normally widely dispersed, each with a differently positioned reclining male nude, or the pairing of the two series of Sacraments, could make you reformulate your notion of the painter. So could the sheer abundance of first-rate landscapes, or, rather, first-rate paintings in which setting overpowered figures: the golden wheatfield with Ruth and Boaz that symbolizes summer, in the late series of seasons, or the strobe-lit vision of the Flood that stands for winter. Most remarkable, perhaps, is the *Stormy Landscape with Pyramis and Thisbe* (1651, Städelisches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt), one of the few pictures that bears comparison with Giorgione's *Tempest*, a vast panorama with a luminous, darkling sky split by lightning and a seemingly tranquil landscape disrupted by the violent, tragic story of the ill-fated lovers, at once a spectacular evocation of nature and a meditation on the existence of evil.

Other surprises? The downright eerieness of pictures such as the two versions of a scene from Tasso, *Tancredi and Erminia* (1628–29, the Hermitage, and 1634, the Birmingham Institute of Arts), each based on a strange encounter between a fallen warrior, a maniacally focused woman with a sword, and two horses whose function seems to be to carve out enough space for everyone else. Other pleasures? Seeing again that pair of astonishing battle scenes from Poussin's first years in Rome, now divided between the Hermitage and the Pushkin. (They were last reunited in "The Russian Taste in French Paintings," at the Metropolitan a few years ago.) Crowded, nervous, ferocious, these stunning pictures hark back to Roman relief, further compressed into two dimensions, and, at the same time, point ahead to the squeezed, articulated space of Cubism. There's nothing com-

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parable to these flattened piles of unstable geometric planes until Braque and Picasso in 1910.

Gertrude Stein obviously had not seen these paintings when she wrote that Cubism could have been invented only by a Spaniard, but she overlooked, too, the importance to the Cubists of another French master who revered Poussin; Cézanne, who, as everyone knows, strove "to do Poussin over from nature." The qualities that Cézanne must have admired in the work of his distinguished predecessor—rock-solid forms, decisive contours, harmonious and logical structure—are not explicitly present in his own, but make themselves felt as a perhaps unattainable ideal—the famous archetypical "cone, cylinder, and sphere" that he sought in nature. Cézanne may have responded, as well, to the sense of holding-back in Poussin, the quality of deep feeling channeled by formal (in both senses of the word) devices, that seems to parallel his own suppression of overt, flamboyant drama as his work matured. It's hard to imagine what Cézanne made of Poussin's color, especially the rather acid, unmodulated hues of later pictures, peculiar chromatic orchestrations that, unlike Cézanne's form-creating touches of warm and cool, often shatter the spatial logic of a picture. (How much of this is due to fugitive colors, darkening, and general deterioration is, of course, another matter, but this kind of tension between illusionistic space and color pulse is frequently visible in even Poussin's best preserved canvases.)

Cézanne was, of course, not the only modernist to respond deeply to Poussin. Matisse, too, owed him a great deal, both directly, for his paradigmatic images of the pastoral, and indirectly, through Cézanne's Poussin-influenced bathers. I'm not the first to invoke Cézanne in relation to a miraculous little drawing of three nymphs beside a river (Royal Library, Windsor Castle), with its tightly grouped reclining nudes, their ample forms strongly modeled with broad swipes of brown wash, and a row of tree trunks in the background, but I couldn't help thinking, as well, of Matisse's massive *Bathers with a Turtle* (1908, St. Louis Art Museum). There's no evidence that either Cézanne or Matisse knew the drawing in question, yet the undeniable affinities are vivid evidence of a continuous tradition, at least in spirit. Picasso's responses to Poussin attest to a different kind of continuity, more Oedipal than admiring. (The exception is his evident awe of the Chantilly *Massacre of the Innocents*, which informs *Guernica*, among other equally serious works.) Most of his improvisations "after Poussin" are closer to parody than homage, but it's nonetheless suggestive that he felt it necessary to pit himself against the Baroque master, as he did against Velázquez, Ingres, and Delacroix.

Poussin's drawings provided many of the retrospective's high points. All of his varied approaches to drawing were represented, from rapid jottings, made as he juggled ideas, to more careful renditions made to convey information to collectors or codify a final decision, from scribbled line drawings to elegant combinations of delineating line and transparent, form-bestowing wash. There's a wonderful loosening of contour—without any weakening of form—in Poussin's drawings, an invigorating openness quite unlike the sculptural, closed delineation of his paintings, that is especially appealing to twentieth-century eyes. Even more accessible to modern taste are the brushy drawings where tone all but drowns line and only a few, telling islands of untouched paper remain to suggest form and mass. Most touching and immediate, however, and more revealing than either of the self-portraits, good as they are, were a few late drawings where a tremulous line, startling amid all that sureness, recorded the passage of the unsteady hand that the aging artist complained of in his letters.

What else? The exhibition catalogue is an exemplary, scholarly work, with essays by a variety of specialists examining specific aspects of Poussin's career, the reception of his work in his own day, and much more, including his relationship to his contemporaries, his collectors, and his patrons. The

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last is particularly significant, since unlike most artists of Poussin's fame, he worked mainly for individual patrons rather than executing large public commissions, a peculiarity that is reflected in the intimate scale and, perhaps, in the complex iconography of the majority of his works, characteristics that set them apart from bombastic public-scale pictures of the period, meant to be apprehended from a distance. Scrupulous entries for each exhibited work probe thorny issues of dating and interpretation by summing up critical and art-historical commentary over the years. (The wall labels in Paris drew heavily upon such sources, offering useful guides to complicated motifs through the comments of Poussin's first biographers and his own letters; if the organizers of the reduced version of the show that will open in London later this month are smart, they will simply translate these texts.) The catalogue illustrations are not noticeably awful, although the full richness and intensity of color is lost. The reproductions of drawings, probably because they are less reduced than those of canvases, are generally excellent.

The strongest objection voiced about the Poussin retrospective, apart from the absence of the Chantilly pictures (which do not travel), was protest against the decision to exhibit as many pictures as possible in daylight, which at the Grand Palais means a strong side light. From my experience of several visits in varying conditions of light and different times of day, I'd say that there are moments when the idea seems inspired, but that even the moderate crowds on normal days make it difficult to find the ideal, reflection-free viewing spot for each work and that the long, artificially-lit gallery where the two versions of the Sacraments are installed comes as a relief; the paintings glow. Of course, the series are particularly well preserved, so that their color is unusually fresh, but I'm glad I was able to see the second set, where pools of darkness frame radiant islands of drama, without having to weave back and forth to find an optimum viewpoint—not that the effort to see the day-lit portion of the show wasn't worth it.

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Squaring the circle: Stéphane Mallarmé

by John Simon

If Stéphane Mallarmé was not the greatest poet of modern times—although an impressive case for that, too, could be mounted—he was certainly the most poetic. And poetic not only in his work, but also in his life. No one else has lived poetry quite so single-mindedly as he did.

The tendency persists to think of the "poetic" poet as Byron, Baudelaire, or Rilke. But Byron's womanizing, incest, covert homosexuality, swimming the Hellespont, and early death for the Greek cause (in a sickbed, to be sure) are poetic only by narrowly romantic standards. Baudelaire's bohemian existence as a *poète maudit*, with drink, drugs, a mulatto mistress, venereal disease, and premature demise, is poetic only within a similarly narrow, *décadent* frame of reference. Rilke, a great poet, carried sensitivity to new, indeed sickly, heights; wrote reams of verse and even more letters (many to women he bedded, others to rich, aristocratic ladies who extended him limitless hospitality amid gracious surroundings); was "poetic" chiefly in the current academic sense: good for graduate theses, what with enough poetry, alternative versions, and fragments to stuff dozens of doctoral dissertations.

Mallarmé lived the poet's life—the poetic vocation—much more truly. He made his toilsome living as a schoolmaster, for a long time in the provinces, and was a good husband and father, save for one brief and ultimately harmless affair with the glamorous Méry Laurent. He traveled little, worked hard at the tasks he hated and labored lovingly on the poetry he adored, had a number of literary friendships and even his own modest but prestigious literary salon. He dedicated his inner life to the *Livre* or *Grand'Oeuvre*—a kind of poetic masterwork that would alchemically transform the world—which he kept writing in his head and in fragmentary notes he urged his wife and daughter to destroy after his death. What he did finish and publish was some of the world's finest lyrical poetry (small in quantity compared to his voluminous occasional verse and syntactically opaque prose), but so intricately and dazzlingly crafted as to attain the nearest human equivalent to perfection, and to almost completely defy translation. This difficult, untranslatable poetry is what keeps Mallarmé far less known than he deserves to be. Typically, *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* dismissed him summarily until recent editions; finally included, he is represented by a measly quintet of entries, one of them a misquotation. To add insult to injury, all of them (including the misquotation) are clearly transcribed from Norbert Guterman's *A Book of French Quotations* rather than from the original texts.

So the appearance of a fresh Mallarmé biography and a new translation of all of Mallarmé's major poetry in verse and prose *cum* much-needed commentary is to be saluted, even if the result—at least in the case of the translation—is less than a blessing.

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I refer to *A Throw of the Dice: The Life of Stéphane Mallarmé*, by Gordon Millan,[1] and *Stéphane Mallarmé: Collected Poems*,[2] comprising translations and commentaries by Henry Weinfield. Let me proceed, in an order Mallarmé would have frowned at, by putting the life ahead of the work.

Gordon Millan is a professor of French at Strathclyde University in Glasgow, and a co-editor of a three-volume critical edition of Mallarmé's works (three volumes of correspondence are to follow) for the venerable French publisher Flammarion. His book, in large, readable print, runs to just under four hundred pages, forty-four of them notes—about as concise as a serious biography gets these prolix days; no wonder it was written by a Scot. It is true that Mallarmé's life was uneventful, but since this is a critical biography of the world's hardest modern poet, the book's terseness is to be applauded.

Mallarmé was born in 1842 into a family of bureaucrats on both sides. His father, Numa, was to end up as a mid-level civil servant who, for reasons of health, retired early. Stéphane lost his mother when he was five, his beloved sister Maria ten years later. Brought up largely by his strict maternal grandparents, especially the formidable grandmother, Fanny Desmolins, he was sent to a fancy boarding school and then to a Jesuit *collège* in Passy, where he alternated between winning prizes and doing poorly. He was especially hostile to Religious Study, and was resented for being a loner. Some of the time, though, he lived with his father and young stepmother, Anne, who proved a most understanding protectress to the boy at crucial turning points.

Numa Mallarmé became *conservateur des hypothèques* in the cathedral town of Sens, seventy-five miles southeast of Paris. Accordingly, Stéphane transferred to the Lycée Impérial of Sens, his holidays to be divided between the grandparents at Passy and the parents at Sens. At age eighteen, very much against his wishes, he started working at the Registry Office in Sens, with a dull bureaucratic career in the offing. But he was to get support for his rebellion from a young schoolmaster and published poet, Emmanuel des Essarts, who befriended the budding poet-registrar, for Stéphane was already scribbling verse imitative of his idols, Hugo and Baudelaire.

Anne Mallarmé, the intelligent stepmother, listened to Des Essarts, and helped get permission for Stéphane to change careers, for which, as a minor, he needed the permission of his stern Catholic grandfather and guardian, André Desmolins. The idea, only reluctantly agreed to by André, was for Stéphane to become a teacher of languages, specifically English, wherefore he was to undertake an extended stay in England after some private English lessons. But he was loath to lock himself up, as André wished, in a Catholic boarding school in England. The deadlock was broken by Anne, and Stéphane was soon taking his morning lessons, then reading the newer poets: Leconte de Lisle, Banville, and Gautier. Also Shakespeare and, discovered through Baudelaire's translations, the poet he was himself to translate and love all his life, Edgar Allan Poe.

Thanks to Des Essarts, Stéphane met a young Parisian law clerk, Henri Cazalis, who was to become his best friend, correspondent, and confident. A crucial incident for the young poet was an outing in the forest of Fontainebleau with Cazalis and his gang, which included the painter Henri Regnault and the future *salonnière* Anne-Marie Gaillard, later known as Nina de Villars. (Renaming oneself was quite the fashion: Mallarmé himself was baptized Etienne, which he ennobled into the Hellenic Stéphane, from *stephanos*, a garland or crown.) Also present were the daughters of the English journalist Edward Yapp, the elder to be Cazalis's Dulcinea. In the romantic Franchard Gorge of the forest, Mallarmé was

1 *A Throw of the Dice: The Life of Stéphane Mallarmé*, by Gordon Millan; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 389 pages, $35.

2 *Stéphane Mallarmé: Collected Poems*, translated and with a commentary by Henry Weinfield; University of California Press, 282 pages, $25.

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later to propose to his future wife, and it was in this forest that, much later still, he would spend some of his happiest hours.

Stéphane rhapsodized about the charms of the English girls: "Those perfect Greek waists, not a pretentious wasp waist but the waist of an angel who would unfold her wings from beneath her corsage." He at first mistook Marie Gerhard, the rather plain, uneducated German governess, seven years his senior, for one of those "adorable creatures" from Albion, which probably accounts for his courting and, eventually, marrying her. By this time the pair were living, somewhat strainedly, in London, where, after a break-up or two, the wedding took place in 1863, with Stéphane, at the time, a sexually very inexperienced twenty-one-year-old. Having acquired a not quite ironclad expertise in English, Mallarmé was sent to teach, not as he hoped in or near Paris, but in the provincial town of Tournon on the Rhône, 350 miles from the capital, and, to the disappointed young man, a place of Ovidian exile. "The inhabitants of this dismal village," he wrote at first (he was to soften a bit later on), "live in too great an intimacy with their pigs for me to find them anything other than disgusting."

Just before heading south, though, Mallarmé met the poet, man of letters, and womanizer Catulle Mendès, who was to become one of his closest friends along with Edouard Manet and the novelist and dramatist Villiers de l'Isle Adam (best remembered for his influential *Axël*), who might be described as a *prosateur maudit*. This eccentric, impoverished Breton nobleman symbolized for Mallarmé "the absolute figure of the Poet," as Alan Raitt has said in his life of Villiers. Tournon was a bitter pill after such scintillating company, yet, strangely, London came to Mallarmé's rescue: its memories were from then on to haunt his imagination. But Tournon, that "dismal hole," also brought about with its foul weather the recurrence of the rheumatic condition that was to plague Mallarmé much of his life.

Still, it is here that some of his very good earlier poems began to take shape, and work commenced on the poetic drama *Hérodiade*, with which Stéphane wrestled all his life, and which survives only in fragmented form. In an 1864 letter to Cazalis, Mallarmé formulates his lifelong poetics, "Paint not the thing itself, but the effect that it produces." Writing in 1865 to another important friend, Eugène Lefébure, Mallarmé sounds one of his most constant refrains: "The artist *becomes himself* in front of the blank sheet of paper." And he conceived of the passionate struggle with poetic creation as inimical to domestic happiness, though he "would always remain," in Millan's words, "a loving father and a loyal and devoted husband."

In the same year, Mallarmé complains to Cazalis: "Imagine being a washed up old man at the age of twenty-three when all the others whom we love live amid sunlight and are ready to write their masterpieces." But he cheers up when, with the first version of *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, he imagines having invented a new form of dramatic verse "insofar as the line breaks are quite slavishly calculated to follow the gestures of the actor without abandoning poetry aimed at mass effects." Poor Mallarmé, mass effects were not part of his repertoire, then or ever. The work was rejected by the Comédie Française for not having a story line strong enough to sustain audience interest.

Although the Mallarmés lived rather comfortably—not on a teacher's salary, but on a trust fund from Stéphane's mother—the poet was spending too much on ever fancier apartments and furnishings. But he now had a fine view of the Rhône, and soon sunrises and sunsets began to figure prominently in his verse. There were, however, problems with his job: then and throughout, Mallarmé the teacher was getting low ratings from students, headmasters, and inspectors. On the other hand, on visits to Paris, he was starting to frequent important fellow poets such as Leconte de Lisle, Heredia, and Coppée. In the south, notably in Avignon, he was befriending Théodore Aubanel and other members of the *félibrige*,

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the circle of poets writing in Provençal.

As significant as that long-ago excursion to Fontainebleau was a trip to the Riviera with Eugène Lefébure. They explored Cannes, Nice, and environs, and had a wonderful time discussing poetry. It lasted only one week, but it echoed strongly in Mallarmé's work, and eventually gave rise to the major poem "Prose (pour des Esseintes)." These talks with Lefébure also resulted in two capital insights. One concerned the difficulty of writing, of the rarity of that precise harmony, or correlation, between sound and sense Mallarmé strove for in verse. The other involved the precariousness of life itself, brought home to him by his recent illnesses. Language was no more than a collection of meaningless conventional signs, and life could absurdly end at any moment. He became aware, in Millan's words, "of the extremely fine line separating absence and presence, being and nothingness, life and death, which later . . . he could place at the very centre of his work and make the cornerstone of his personal philosophy and his mature poetics." And he launched on a pursuit of what he first called "Beauty," and subsequently "the quintessential but totally elusive quality of life itself." Art now loomed as a substitute for religious belief, to which, after his discovery of the void—*le néant*—underlying the world, he could no longer subscribe. Contemplating a volume of poetry to be called something like *The Glory of Lying*, he declared, "I shall sing as a man without Hope."

In letters to Cazalis, he announced, "Having discovered the void, I have discovered Beauty" (1866), and, the following year, "I have descended deep enough into the Void to be able to speak with certainty. There is only Beauty, and it has only one perfect means of expression, Poetry." Such obsessiveness merely made his teacherly activities suffer the more. His publishing of poems in the "avant-garde" *Parnasse Contemporain*, moreover, was considered outrageous in Tournon; some parents even contemplated removing their children from his tutelage. The principal of his *lycée* pronounced on his English teacher: "Talks a lot about poetry and the ideal, but professes only modest esteem for his fellow men."

Mallarmé's next teaching job was at Besançon, where he did not do much better and wasn't any happier. He kept living beyond his means, and expecting his grandmother to bail him out. He rejected Christianity completely, which took courage considering that it put him at odds with his wife and entire family. In the bitterly cold winter of Besançon, he kept looking at the stars and became obsessed with the Great Bear. Somehow the Great Work he was planning was to mirror the structure of that constellation: there was to be an "ultimate correlation between Poetry and the Universe." The *Grand'Oeuvre* was to be the equal of the Venus de Milo and the Mona Lisa, "absolute and unconscious Beauty." Meanwhile the agony of an ailing body, in that unprecedentedly cold winter, found expression in the famous sonnet "Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui," whose magnificent swan has become trapped in winter's ice.

By now the father of a growing girl, Geneviève, Mallarmé came to realize that excessive intellectual activity to the exclusion of everything else was extremely harmful. "To be truly human," he wrote Lefébure in 1867, "you have to think with your entire body." Yet it is at this point that, transferred to Avignon with its pleasant climate, he writes one of his most rigorously cerebral poems, the notorious "-ix sonnet," beginning "Ses purs ongles très haut dédiant leur onyx." It is based on the decision to have one set of its rhymes in -ix, no easy feat in French. Millan does scant justice to this sonnet; he does not even quote the important passage from the annunciatory letter to Lefébure: "I may write a sonnet, and as I have only three rhymes in -ix, do your best to send me the true meaning of the word ptyx, for I'm told it doesn't exist in any language—something I'd much prefer, for that would give me the joy of creating it through the magic of rhyme." But the word does occur in Greek, where it means a fold or a shell, of the kind that pressed to the ear sug-

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gests the sound of the sea. Millan reproduces this sonnet without explicating *ptyx*, which I find remiss.

Mallarmé's own comment on this poem in a letter to Cazalis, to whom it is dedicated, is significant: "Its meaning if it has one (but I would be quite consoled if this were not the case, thanks to the large dose of poetry that to me it seems to contain) is conveyed through a hidden mirage suggested by the words themselves." The bantering tone, Millan observes, is misleading; Mallarmé very seriously tried "to encapsulate . . . his absurdist vision of the world as a glorious and tantalizing mirage. Its theme is the absence/presence paradox which lies at the very centre of his poetic universe."

Foolish expenditure on redecorating the Avignon flat plunged Stéphane into hysteria and forced him to take to his bed for a few days. His attempts to raise money, as his salary underwent various cuts, were pitiful. But the death of his grandmother jolted him back into writing again, the result being the curious Poesque tale "Igitur." He grasped at a variety of desperate projects to make more money, especially as Marie was about to give birth to their second child, Anatole. Luckily the pull he had through friends at the Ministry of Education finally paid off, and he obtained a job at the Lycée Condorcet in Paris. He was almost thirty years old.

He settled in the inexpensive district near the Gare St. Lazare on rue de Moscou, whence he could walk to school and to the boulevards with the theaters he loved. Further pull got him promoted to senior-class teacher and better pay. Life improved. There were the literary and artistic friendships old and new, Manet becoming especially dear to the poet. Through him, Mallarmé got involved in the art world and its controversies, and turned into a passionate champion of Manet and the Impressionists. He became editor of the fashion magazine *La Mode Dernière*, and, under various pseudonyms, often its sole contributor. He discovered the village of Valvins on the Seine at the edge of the forest of Fontainebleau. This was to become his steady summer home. He published a deluxe edition of his translation of Poe's "The Raven," illustrated by Manet; then went to London on an invitation that resulted in his contributing a regular column to *The Athenaeum* on the literary and artistic life of Paris. The final version of *L'Après-midi d'un faune* appeared in a limited edition likewise illustrated by Manet.

Immersed in the literary life, in art-world infighting, in often vain attempts to get his poetry published, Mallarmé neglected his teaching even more. On a commission from England's *Art Monthly*, he wrote an article in defense of Manet that, as Millan puts it, "can now be seen [as] one of the earliest and most enlightened attempts to define and explain the history of modern painting." But, reprimanded by the school authorities upon publishing his famous sonnet to Poe's memory, Mallarmé stopped bringing out any more verse for a goodly number of years, and rather than jeopardize his family's future, tried to concentrate on his teaching. He did, however, publish a philological treatise, *Les Mots anglais*, and a free adaptation of an English book on mythology, *Les Dieux antiques*. He also worked on his Poe translations. But in many ways he remained a very parochial Frenchman, refusing even to set foot in Germany, his wife's country, because of the Franco-Prussian War, in which his painter friend Henri Regnault was killed.

Another project was to be a major play "to be performed at a fixed period of the year." "I am not concerned with a single genre," he elaborated, "but with all those I consider to belong to theatrical performance: magical, popular and lyrical drama." But soon a heavy blow was to dampen Mallarmé's spirits: eight-year-old Anatole died of a rheumatic condition that affected his heart. "That charming, exquisite child had captivated me to the point where I still include him in all my future projects and my dearest dreams." Stéphane had even hoped that Anatole would someday finish the *Grand'Oeuvre* that he himself would only begin, and that he kept ceaselessly revolving in his head.

At this point Méry Laurent becomes stel-

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lar in Mallarmé's life. The daughter of a laundress, she was born Anne-Rose Louviot, had been an unsuccessful actress, and was now a successful *mondaine*. Millan writes, "Renowned for her stately good looks, her statuesque and buxom features [can features be either of those?], luxuriant blonde hair and a perfect complexion, she had become the mistress of a rich American" dentist, and had her winter apartment off the rue de Rome, on which the Mallarmés lived now too. She had been a model and close friend of Manet, perhaps also his mistress, and Stéphane thus got to know her; but it was not until Manet's death that she became important to the poet, partly as a reminder of his lost friend. He would visit her almost daily in winter, a few doors down the rue de Rome; and often, too, at her summer villa on the Boulevard Lannes. They also corresponded extensively. It is fairly certain that, ill-matched as they were, they had a brief affair, but their letters confirming it won't be made available till the year 2000.

In any case, it is to Méry that Mallarmé wrote his finest love poems; one need only compare such a dignified but cool poem as "Don du poëme," written to his wife, with the sonnet to Méry, "O si chère de loin et proche et blanche," to appreciate the difference. In fact, a French girl from the bourgeoisie whom I knew on my Fulbright year in Paris and tried to sell on Mallarmé, wrote me in America that she would have had little use for the poet were it not for that poem, the only one she could truly warm to. It is indeed a great love poem. Mallarmé's fellow poet and friend, the aristocratic and strait-laced Henri de Régnier, found Méry rather common, but Stéphane thought her the ideal person to relax with from the chores of teaching and the exertions of the literary life. "The charming and frivolous quatrains with which he embellished her fans and other possessions" are among the jewels of Mallarmé's copious occasional verse.

By this time, he was beginning to be recognized as the leader of the Symbolists, and the Tuesday evenings on the rue de Rome were the place to be for artists both French and foreign. Mallarmé would be holding forth almost uninterruptedly, and Marie, assisted by Geneviève, would tend to the modest amenities. Two men, at this time, greatly contributed to Mallarmé's unsolicited and not especially welcome celebrity. J.-K. Huysmans had sought his help with the writing of *A rebours*, the paradigmatic novel about an art-for-art's-sake dilettante, and Mallarmé's old friend, Paul Verlaine, published a three-part study of him in *Lutèce*, as part of a project on the *Poètes maudits*. It was accompanied by Manet's beautiful portrait of the poet, which also graces the jacket of Millan's biography. The articles then came out in book form (1884), almost simultaneously with *A rebours*, which named "Mallarmé, along with Rimbaud, as one of the most exquisite poets of the age."

Mallarmé was indeed an aesthete in the admirable yet somewhat troublesome sense of *japonaiserie*, Wagnerism, calligraphy, *lavallières*, the hieratic role of the artist (particularly the poet), and all the rest. But Romanticism having become *embourgeoisé* on the one hand and decadent on the other, the time was ripe for a poet who took his mission seriously, even mystically, especially if, like Mallarmé (unlike many of his disciples), he also had a smiling, playful side to him. The sense of mission is reflected in further words of the letter to Cazalis, part of which I quoted earlier. Other than poetry, "everything else is a lie—except in the case of those who live the life of the body, for love, and for that love of the mind, friendship." Thus does a touch of hedonism enter the hierophantic; the latter gets its apotheosis in a missive to Léo d'Orfer (1884): "Poetry is the expression, through human language reduced to its essential rhythm, of the mysterious meaning of the various aspects of existence. In this way it authenticates our sojourn on this planet and constitutes our sole intellectual challenge."

Yet there remained, behind everything Mallarmé was writing, the Great Work, sometimes referred to as The Book, of which "there is only one, which has been at-

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tempted, whether they knew it or not, by all who have ever written, including men of genius." In the conversations of the famous Tuesdays, with the many distinguished *mardistes*, and in those fragments that have posthumously come to light, the pursuit of that Book was paramount. Wretched Mallarmé; as he wrote John Payne in 1886, "I never sleep any more and that is how I imagine the state of eternal damnation." Millan is averse to including the anecdotal in his biography; otherwise he might have mentioned Mallarmé's telling someone that he had not slept in twenty years, and upon that person's rejoinder, "You mean *hardly* slept?" exclaiming, "No, not at all!"

Tough going as Mallarmé's poetry is, his prose is even more difficult. The first drama review he wrote for his disciple Edouard Dujardin (the official inventor of the *monologue intérieur* and editor of the *Revue Indépendente*) seemed to the latter much too obscure in places. To every respectful objection, Mallarmé replied, "But this is perfectly clear!" That, for him, was the truth and no affectation. Yet, as another anecdote has it (and, as such, likewise excluded by Millan), Verlaine's funeral procession was already under way when Mallarmé was still sitting at a café table, fiddling with his eulogy. Asked what he was doing, he answered he was adding a few last-minute obscurities.

Be that as it may, his arcane style certainly made him a failure on the lecture circuit. A telegram from Brussels to his wife and daughter runs, "FIRST LECTURE LASTS 2 1/2 HOURS. STUPEFACTION. MALLARME." Cut down to an hour, it still didn't go over, with even the friend Edgar Degas bored and fidgeting. The Banquet Years were at hand, but Mallarmé, at first an enthusiastic participant in these gastronomic literary tributes, was soon remarking, "The world of literature is becoming very strange, and there is something indecent in appearing to be connected with it in any way whatsoever." But his sense of humor did not forsake him. Thus when he received a telegram from Whistler (whom he considered "the very personification of the artist") that the "magpie" Oscar Wilde was coming to a *mardi*, "WARN DISCIPLES PRECAUTION FAMILIARITY FATAL KEEP TIGHT GRIP ON PEARLS OF WISDOM," Mallarmé replied, "The evening was as dull as you would have wished."

Occasionally Gordon Millan's acuity is dulled too. Throughout the book, he prints Mallarmé's poems with unassumingly serviceable translations. But in rendering "Salut," the prefatory piece to the *Collected Poems*, Millan errs badly. This banquet poem begins

> Rien, cette écume, vierge vers
> A ne désigner que la coupe;
> Telle loin se noie une troupe
> De sirènes mainte à l'envers.

Millan translates this as "Nothing, mere froth, virgin verse/ If I am referring to the cup;/ Just as in the distance a troop/ Of many sirens drowns upside-down." Surely, Millan should have given the second verse as "To characterize only the cup," and the fourth, with its deliberate poeticism *mainte*, as something like "Many a one upside down." It is words like *mainte*, *aucun*, and *telle* that become most telling in Mallarmé. On the other hand, we can't blame Millan for not being able to reproduce in English the wordplay to which Charles Chassé has called attention, [3] the puns on *vers* (verse) and *verre* (drinking glass), and *coupe* (cup or caesura).

Mallarmé's often serious humor manifested itself to a journalist seeking his take on an anarchist bomb exploded in the Chamber of Deputies: "The only bomb of which I am aware is a book." To some of his *mardistes*, as Henri de Régnier reports, he was even sharper: "There is only one person who has the right to be an anarchist, and that is I, the poet. Because I alone supply the product for which society has no use, and in exchange for which it does not provide me with enough to live on." By this time, to be sure, he was able to give up his detested teaching, even if only six years were left him in which

3 *Lueurs sur Mallarmé*, by Charles Chassé (Editions de la Nouvelle Revue Critique, Paris, 1947).

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to enjoy his blessed liberation. Now there was more time for everything, including his beloved concert-going, and working undisturbed on The Book. Yet there was also his gregariousness, which elicited Geneviève's comment, "You are not really a solitary monk, no, not at all."

He was now a regular at the dinners of Berthe Morisot and Méry Laurent, and became a steady contributor to Natanson and Fénéon's *Revue Blanche*. He became a favorite subject of *enquêtes* (celebrity interviews or questionnaires), so popular at the time, the frenetic pace at which he pursued his alleged "doing nothing" actually impairing his health. There were recurrent bouts of flu and rheumatism, aggravated by heavy smoking and near-permanent insomnia. His election as "prince of poets" upon Verlaine's death, with its attendant publicity, gave him little pleasure. Somewhat reluctantly, he published his prose poems and other prose under the dismissive title *Divagations*. In some of these he "created a new hybrid," as Millan states, "somewhere between the traditional prose poem and the review article," which he called "poème critique."

Then, too, he undertook his longest, most daringly innovative, and most hermetic poem, "Un Coup de dés" ("A Throw of the Dice"), which, though a culmination of sorts, was not meant to be the Great Work.[4] It was to have been published in a luxury edition illustrated by Redon, which never materialized. To Elémir Bourges, he wrote, "Each day I descend a rung on the ladder into emptiness and disgust." Even a banquet in his honor, organized by the greatest of his disciples, Paul Valéry, misfired because of rivalries between the older and younger literati. With Valéry at Valvins, Mallarmé had grand times boating, walking, and chatting, and enjoying simple, hearty meals. I would give anything for a transcript of the incident Valéry reports in a letter to Gide, another admirer of Mallarmé's: "In the evening, after some boating and some drinks (always too many), we had a rather interesting and serious but rather dirty conversation." Serious dirt from Mallarmé and Valéry ought to be worth its weight in gold.

Work on the verse play *Hérodiade* proceeded fitfully but stubbornly, the great actress Marguerite Moréno hoping to play the heroine. When Zola was on trial for having defended Dreyfus, Mallarmé dispatched an admiringly supportive telegram. He also commiserated with Rodin, whose statue of Balzac was rejected by the people who had commissioned it: "After all," he wrote to his sculptor friend, "you have the glory of knowing you are right." When literary work got too taxing, there was puttering in the Valvins garden, or playing with the cat Lilith. At this time, a sore throat turned into tonsillitis. On September 8, 1898, the doctor came; the poet joked that, from coughing, he was as red in the face as an exotic rooster. "In the middle of his sentence, a coughing fit overcame him. He looked quickly at his daughter, then made a grab for the doctor and collapsed on top of him, asphyxiated by a sudden contraction of the glottis. He was fifty-six years old." In photographs of that period, he looks a good deal older.

Many peasants of Valvins attended the funeral of "Mossieu Mallarmé," whom they considered a genial neighbor. Paul Valéry, scheduled to speak, was too choked up. In a farewell note, Mallarmé advised his wife and daughter to burn all his papers, but he left the note unfinished, giving rise to speculations about whether he might have changed his mind. It is significant that James Joyce possessed an edition of "Un Coup de dés" as he worked on *Finnegans Wake*; both works are terminal, unreadable masterpieces. Gauguin, learning in Tahiti of the poet's death, remarked, "The best part of his work was his life." Three weeks before his death, Mallarmé answered a query with, "I have been sufficiently faithful to myself for my humble life

4 "The last work . . . which, with its diverse fonts and word-islands in an amorphous sea of broad white surfaces, comes across at first like a graphic foretaste of Cubist painting." *Mallarmé: Dichtung, Weisheit, Haltung*, by Kurt Wais (C. H. Beckscbe Verlagsbuchhandlung, Munich, 1952).

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to have retained some meaning." As in his final poem, so in all his work, Mallarmé's achievement was, to quote Millan, "a heroic and defiant throw of the dice."

It seems to me that Mallarmé foundered on a grandiose self-contradiction, though such a defeat may surpass most victories. His poetic aim was a pure contradiction (remember Rilke's epitaph for himself, with its *reiner Widerspruch*?): to have poetry not say, but suggest; yet to create with words something as solid, shapely, and unalterable as a constellation. On the one hand, the cultivation of the misty aura; on the other, the obsession with the indelible contour.

The other great problem, of course, is the obscurity. Though he never saw it that way, Mallarmé was the most mandarin, most abstruse of poets. Not because of any recondite references, but because of the complex imagery, complicated syntax, and expressly cultivated ambiguity. And also because of his compression. Writing poetry for him was like translating the baroque into telegraphese. Yet at the same time—and this makes an enormous difference—there was the verbal music, equaled perhaps by a few, but never surpassed. For Mallarmé—and this was a first—sound could become tantamount to meaning. As he told Degas, who showed him one of his poems (another anecdote excluded by Millan) and defended the ideas in it, "Poems are made with words, not ideas." Mallarmé's poetry is in the sound of those words, their etymologies, their unstable equilibrium and polyvalent interaction.

Still, the hermetic aspect can be exaggerated. Mallarmé's earlier poems are also remarkable, yet totally perspicuous. Many of his verses have that musical magic that on one exposure etches itself into the memory. Who can forget "La chair est triste, hélas! et j'ai lu tous les livres"? Or "Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui"? Or take the famous verses about Poe, who undertook to "Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu," but came into his own only in death, "Tel qu'en Lui-même enfin l'éternité le change." (This one inspires wits. I shall never forget coming across a headshot of Henri Troyat in a *bouquiniste*'s window, with the author's superscription, "Tel qu'en lui-même enfin le photographe le change.") Or, about a prostitute, "Toi qui sur le néant en sais plus que les morts." And the eponymous key line that winds its way through the entire final poem: "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard." It is misquoted both by Norbert Guterman's *A Book of French Quotations* and by the copycat *Bartlett's* as "Un coup de dés n'abolira jamais le hasard," which kills the rhythm and illustrates the difference between Mallarmé's verbal music and the prose of the tribe, anthologists included.

There are many more great lines. One could go on, though not quite forever, for Mallarmé's poetry, not counting the occasional verse and poems in prose, constitutes almost less than a tome—something rather like a *plaquette*. In this, too, he is a father of such moderns as T. S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom, and that fine poet better known as a publisher, Francis Meynell.

But to return to the verbal music. Mallarmé, as we have seen in connection with the sonnet in -ix, was not averse to letting the music do more than mirror, actually *become* the meaning. Even so, unlike the later Surrealists and Dadaists, he did not really favor divesting himself of content. Hence his comment on Victor Hugo: "What a poet he would have been if he had had something to say." Millan cites in a note that, in 1886, *Le Gaulois* printed an attack by Tolstoy on Mallarmé's incomprehensibility. He does not mention that this became part of *What Is Art?*, a book-length polemic, in which the Russian master contemptuously quotes Mallarmé's famous dictum, "To name an object is to take away three-quarters of the enjoyment of the poem, which consists of the happiness of guessing bit by bit: to suggest it, that is the dream." Tolstoy then reproduces the sonnet "A la nue accablante tu," albeit with a bad misreading (*soir* for *sais* in line six), as typical of the poet's inscrutability. In a footnote, Aylmer Maude, the English translator, says tersely, "This sonnet is too unintelligible for translation."

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When Mallarmé sent a brief, ironic response to *Le Gaulois*, the editor put in his two centimes' worth: "M. Stéphane Mallarmé is an exquisite writer and a distinguished poet, but why in the devil's name does he write so that nobody can understand him?" It is, however, no use wishing that Mallarmé were simpler; as I wrote in my doctoral thesis, "Mallarmé's syntax is his first and last—perhaps also his greatest—metaphor."[5]

And now along comes another optimist—dreamer and hothead—who undertakes a verse translation, no less, of all of Mallarmé's poetry. Henry Weinfield, a self-styled poet who teaches in Notre Dame's Liberal Studies Department, has brought out *Stéphane Mallarmé: Collected Poems*, comprising the poems and facing translations —the rhymed ones in rhyme—followed by extensive commentaries in the back.

The "Introduction" is promising enough. "Speaking metaphorically," Weinfield says, "my primary struggle in this translation has been to render the 'music,' or 'musical essence,' or 'spiritual essence,' of the poetry." He quotes the twenty-year-old Mallarmé: "Everything that is sacred and that wishes to remain so must envelop itself in mystery." And the translator concludes that "Poetry is . . . not only the vehicle but the locus of the sacred for Mallarmé, and in a sense he remains a religious poet even though he loses his belief," a statement befitting one who teaches at a Catholic university. But paradox becomes even more problematic with "Mallarmé is much more of a realist than we have been given to understand, and I would even argue that an essential aim of this poet is toward demystification." Note the sloppy diction: "aim" does not require "toward."

Weinfield is on safer ground with actual quotations, as with "Everything in the world exists to end up [or culminate—'aboutir'] in a book." Or the famous passage from a letter to Cazalis about "my terrible struggle with that old and evil plumage, which is now happily vanquished: God. But as that struggle had taken place on his bony wing which was in death throes more vigorous than I would have suspected," the combat took a dreadful toll. Weinfield fails to derive from this the concept of poetry as a death struggle. This is what Valéry expresses: "as for the world, the totality of the real has no other excuse for being than to offer the poet the chance of playing against it a sublime game, lost in advance."[6]

On the other hand, Weinfield is right to call attention to Mallarmé's revisions of his earlier work, "so the stylistic propensities of the early poems often reflect the poet's later development." Equally correctly, he notes that, at least in the early work, there is concern with social and political issues. Social more than political, I would say. I wish Weinfield could have resisted jargon such as "intertextual meta-narrative" and "semiotic displacement," while he justly recognizes Mallarmé's basic untranslatability. "I did it anyway," Weinfield concludes, brushing aside acknowledged obstacles.

With what results, though? One can turn to any one of these translations to inspect his almost complete failure. In the earlier, easier poems, there may be a glimmer of success here and there; in the later, tougher ones, all is fiasco. But let's start with an early poem, "Apparition." For Mallarmé's pure rhymes —*pleurs-fleurs*, *violes-corolles*—we get such shabby approximations as "tears-flowers," "violas-corollas," which do not work even as slant rhyme. "S'enivrer savamment" is far more elegant and eloquent than "imbibed its wisdom." And can a near-rhyme be more cacophonous than Weinfield's "them-then"? Can we tolerate, for "tu m'es en riant apparue," "suddenly you happened to appear"? Or for "laisse/ La cueillaison d'un Rêve au coeur qui l'a cueilli," the feeble "Which . . . dreams we gather . . ./ Distill within the heart that gathers them"?

5 *The Prose Poem as a Genre in Nineteenth-century European Literature*, by John Simon (Garland Publishing Inc., New York and London, 1987).

6 *Ecrits divers sur Stéphane Mallarmé*, by Paul Valéry (Gallimard, Paris, 1950).

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To get a better idea of the Weinfield minefield, let us examine the entire early sonnet "Angoisse" ("Anguish"). It begins

Je ne viens pas ce soir vaincre ton corps, ô bête
En qui vont les péchés d'un peuple, ni creuser
Dans tes cheveux impurs une triste tempête
Sous l'incurable ennui que verse mon baiser.

I come not to ravish your body, O beast,
In whom the transgressions of multitudes flow,
Nor to rouse a sad storm in your tresses
unchaste,
By the incurable ennui my kisses bestow.

Note immediately the metrical confusion: the first three verses are in tetrameter; the fourth is a clumsy pentameter. "Tresses" is a dubious poeticism, and "tresses unchaste" the kind of Victorian inversion unacceptable in a modern translation. It is wrong to render the simple French word for boredom, *ennui*, with that same word in English, where it strikes a fancy, affected note. To continue:

Je demande à ton lit le lourd sommeil sans
songes
Planant sous les rideaux inconnus du remords,
Et que tu peux goûter après tes noirs
mensonges,
Toi qui sur le néant en sais plus que les morts.

I ask but a dull dreamless sleep from your bed,
Swathed beneath curtains oblivious of remorse,
Which you who know more about nothingness
than the dead
Can taste when your falsehoods have run their
dark course.

Here we are solidly ensconced in pentameter, but "swathed" is hardly the same as *planant*, and "oblivious of remorse" is much weaker than the text's "unknown [*inconnus*] to remorse." Again, it is strategically wrong to put the great climax of the original not at the end of the quatrain, but, anticlimactically, into line three. Besides, "Which you who know more about nothingness than the dead" loses its lapidariness through that "Which," and the verse is further diluted by the unwieldy "nothingness," where both scansion and fidelity would have been better served by "the void."

To save space, I reprint the final tercets as one sestet:

Car le Vice, rongeant ma native noblesse,
M'a comme toi marqué de sa stérilité,
Mais tandis que ton sein de pierre est habité
Par un coeur que la dent d'aucun crime ne
blesse,
Je fuis, pâle, défait, hanté par mon linceul,
Ayant peur de mourir lorsque je couche seul.

For Vice, having gnawed at my innate nobility,
Has marked me like you with a sad sterility:
But while you with your stony breast are the
frame
For a heart that the tooth of no crime wounds
with shame,
Obsessed by my shroud, I flee, pale, undone,
Afraid of dying when I sleep alone.

Now, alas, we are back to tetrameter again and in lines one and two in the worst kind of singsong thanks to that foul, facile rhyme "nobility-sterility," where the inconsistent dactylic ending, moreover, reinforces the jingling, jarring quality. The breast as a "frame" of the heart is a particularly infelicitous image—something three-dimensional does not frame, it contains—and is there patently and painfully for the rhyme. "Obsessed" is wrong for *hanté* (haunted): it suggests fussy concern rather than unrelieved dread. The last verse would be fine, but the *rime riche* of *linceul-seul* is poorly conveyed by the half-rhyme "undone-alone."

Consider next the famous first and last lines of "Brise marine." "La chair est triste, hélas! et j'ai lu tous les livres" becomes "The flesh is sad, alas, and there's nothing but words!" The second hemistich is a disaster: it does not suggest the profound *Weltschmerz* of the bookish shut-in, but some sort of trivial chitchat or altercation, predicating someone not even alone in his study. And what a loss in music vis-à-vis the original with its alliteration and feminine end-

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ing! The last verse, "Mais, ô mon coeur, entends le chant des matelots!" dwindles into "But oh, my heart, listen to the sailors sing!" Here the rich assonance, "entends le chant," is gone, and the sharp masculine ending of "sing" lacks the languorous seduction of the trisyllabic *matelots*.

There are also serious misreadings. Take this from "Toast funèbre": ". . . la mort ancienne est comme pour Gautier/ De n'ouvrir pas les yeux sacrés et de se taire." This comes out as "the task of ancient death for Gautier is to close/ His sacred eyes and keep his secrets." This utterly misses the point, which is that for Gautier, who, as he said, was "a man for whom the external world exists," not to see and speak was a particularly horrible deprivation.

In the later, more difficult poems failure proliferates. "Surgi de la croupe et du bond/ D'une verrerie éphémère/ Sans fleurir la veillée amère/ Le col ignoré s'interrompt" becomes "Sprung from the crupper and flight/ Of an ephemeral vase,/ The neck stopped short and forgotten must pause/ Without flowering the long, bitter night." First, that ugly and misleading "crupper," which could make you believe it means the leather strap attached to a saddle, whereas, in this sensual description of a vase without a flower in it, *croupe* is, of course, the animal's rump, the globular lower part of the vase. *Bond* is the upward leap of the narrow neck of the vase, which does not fly or flee (take flight) but strains upward in vain. "Ephemeral vase," besides naming the thing, which Mallarmé deliberately avoids, has none of the onomatopoeic charm of "verrerie éphémère," the high vowels sounding like tingling crystal. The translation's third line forsakes the trimeter of the first two and crawls into a soggily shapeless pentameter. Again, by reversing the order of the last two verses, the climactic effect of the original's fourth is frittered away; besides, the neck of the vase doesn't pause, it is conclusively interrupted: the yearning for a flower is foiled by the absence of one. And the poet speaks of a bitter vigil of two lovers, not of some abstract, generalized bitter night. Moreover, to complete the confusion, after trimeter and pentameter, verse four is in tetrameter.

Or take the violence done to the next sonnet, "Une dentelle s'abolit." Let me point out one glaring absurdity. In order to get his pitiful rhymes in, Weinfield commits the following visual and rhythmic aberrations:

> Lace sweeps itself aside
> In the doubt of the ultimate Game
> Only to expose profane-
> ly
> eternal absence of bed.
>
> This white and undivid-
> ed
> garland's struggle with the same
> Blown against the ghostly pane
> Floats more than it would hide.

I leave it up to you to find the many other flaws of this octet, but I must call attention, in the sestet, to how the lovely "Au creux néant musicien" becomes "The hollow core's" (Mallarmé would never write, in English, "core's" for "core is"!), which is meant to rhyme with "Filial, might have been born." Aside from being no rhyme, this is a dimeter line supposed to balance a tetrameter one, making mincemeat of Mallarmé's comely, regular octosyllabics.

Why go on? In the Introduction, Weinfield says that "the poems have come to exist for me simultaneously in English and in French," which he claims "should be taken neither as immodesty nor as a sign of incipient madness." But what else can it be taken as? Well, maybe abject benightedness.

The commentaries on the poems, however, are quite decent and helpful. Weinfield has clearly boned up on the available exegeses, which he often quotes or makes other use of, while also contributing explications of his own. The purchaser of this book, then, would be well advised to rip it in two, throw away the first half, and keep the second. To replace what he disposed of, he might purchase the *Mallarmé* in the Penguin Poets series, edited with nice bottom-of-page prose translations by Anthony Hartley,

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worthier than Weinfield's versions, though they, too, come a cropper with "crupper."

Lest it be thought that I have some special animus against Mr. Weinfield, let me adduce the disappointing aspect of Gordon Millan's enterprise as well. It is inconceivable to me how a Glaswegian university professor can write such poor English. To give only a modest sampling of the simpler errors, let me note "enormity" for "enormousness," "infer" for "imply," "verbally" for "orally," "reported back" for "reported," "comprised of" for "consisted of," "intriguing" for "fascinating," and "mutual friend" for "common friend." But at least Millan has written an otherwise readable book.

Amazingly, neither Millan nor Weinfield catches the essence of Mallarmé nearly so well with many words as others have managed with a few. Herewith a little anthology.

Paul Valéry: "Ordinary literature seemed to me comparable to an arithmetic, that is to say to the search for specific results, where one cannot properly distinguish between precept and example; that which [Mallarmé] conceived seemed to me analogous to an algebra, for it presupposed the will to display, to conserve through thoughts, and to develop for their own sake the forms of language." And again: "Consequently, syntax, which is calculation, resumed the rank of a muse."

Jean-Paul Sartre: "[Mallarmé] chooses the terrorism of politeness; with things, with men, with himself, he always maintains an imperceptible distance. It is this distance that he first wishes to express in his verse."

Maurice Blanchot: "[Mallarmé's] is perhaps the last vestige of a language that effaces itself, the very movement of vanishing, but it appears even more as the material emblem of a silence that, to allow itself to be represented, must make itself into a thing, and so remains the scandal of language, its insurmountable paradox." And again: "A pure intellectual act, capable of creating everything by expressing almost nothing."

Francis Ponge: "[Mallarmé] has an exalted idea of the power of the poet. He betrays noise by noise. . . . A poet not to express silence. A poet to cover the other encroaching voices of chance."

Albert Thibaudet: "Anacoluthon and syllepsis are, for Mallarmé, not rhetorical figures, but the very condition of language; not the ruptures of an order, but the form of a freedom." And again: "Poetry, for Mallarmé . . . constitutes itself against two adversaries; it has, Nietzsche would say, two impossibilities: the one Parnassian, that is to say description; the other Romantic, that is to say oratorical inflation."

Pierre Beausire: "What is probably most original and most surprising in his work is this coexistence of mystery and lucidity, this strangeness joined to rigor, this precise and calculating will connected to chance itself."

Robert Graves: "Mallarmé . . . turned the act of suggestion in poetry into a science. He found the tradition of French poetry so exhausted by sterile laws of prosody that he had to practise poetry as a science to avoid malpractising it as an art."

And this from Stefan George, one of Mallarmé's followers, and himself a major poet (incidentally the only one whose verse translations of Mallarmé really work): "For this reason, O poet, do your comrades and disciples so gladly call you master: that you can least be imitated and yet had such power over them; that all strove for the highest perfection of meaning and euphony in order to pass muster in your eyes—because you still preserve a secret from them and allow us the belief in that beautiful Eden that alone is eternal."

As for me, I consider Mallarmé the supreme modern poet because he achieved a transcendence of his own subjectivity into something deceptively close to an objective absolute; because his poetry was the first—and best—to be self-referential in a way permitting us to participate in the creation of the poem; and because of his willingness to accept pure sound—music—*if artfully deployed*, as a surrogate meaning. Mallarmé stood for—or even initiated—all of these. Without him, there would be no modern poetry as we have it today.

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Five poems
by Donald Hall

Resignations

At sixty-five I feel well,
ambitious or zealous for work
and love, as I register
with Social Security for
the perks of seniority.
At the same time I find myself
resigning one by one
my peripheral chores and duties.
Do I address the dreaded
inevitable stoppage of
work and love by relinquishing
my hours minute by minute?
Hopefully I concentrate
on the one day, abandoning
prophylactic busyness
to engage the bliss of ardor.

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The reasonable nap

In nineteen ninety-three
I was up for the NBA in
poetry. From the first day,
when I reckoned up the judges
and nominees, I claimed
A. R. Ammons would win the award.
Nevertheless, he won it.
When Archie walked past our table
toward the stage, I reached for
his hand and shook it like a good sport.
At the reception, the judges
one after another dropped their eyes
and said my stuff
was terrific. I went to sleep easily,
mildly let down, and woke
at three-thirty in murderous rage.

Three hours later, sleeping
for twenty minutes on the shuttle,
I reasoned with myself:
"Why should anyone win some contest?
Who, for instance? When did winning
an award mean you were *good*?
The Pulitzer Prize?
Don't be an ass. The fox is sensible.
Grow up. Go home. Take a shower.
Sit at your desk, and, as the kids
in high school said
with sarcasm, 'Go write a poem about it.'"

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Christmas party
at the South Danbury Church

December twenty-first
we gather at the white Church festooned
red and green, the tree flashing
green-red lights beside the altar.
After the children of Sunday School
recite Scripture, sing songs,
and scrape out solos,
they retire to dress for the finale,
to perform the pageant
again: Mary and Joseph kneeling
cradleside, Three Kings,
shepherds and shepherdesses. Their garments
are bathrobes with mothholes,
cut down from the Church's ancestors.
Standing short and long,
they stare in all directions for mothers,
sisters and brothers,
giggling and waving in recognition,
and at the South Danbury
Church, a moment before Santa
arrives with her ho-hos
and bags of popcorn, in the half-dark
of whole silence, God
enters the world as a newborn again.

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An old life

Snow fell in the night.
At five-fifteen I woke to a bluish
mounded softness where
the Honda was. Cat fed and coffee made,
I broomed snow off the car
and drove to the Kearsarge Mini-Mart
before Amy opened
to yank my *Globe* out of the bundle.
Back, I set my cup of coffee
beside Jane, still half-asleep,
murmuring stuporous
thanks in the aquamarine morning.
Then I sat in my blue chair
with blueberry bagels and strong
black coffee reading news,
the obits, the comics, and the sports.
Carrying my cup twenty feet,
I sat myself at the desk
for this day's lifelong
engagement with the one task and desire.

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Green, red & white

Blueberry bagels and the *Globe*.
Everyone walks in green fields
ignorant of the moment
but knowing that grass will collapse
one day into oblivion.
Every three months a Hitchcock
tech draws a titre of my blood;
a week later the phone rings
with numbers that sustain
the green meadow or swoon it away.

Together we worried
over my days remaining until
on a Monday Jane's
nose bled. By bedtime, oxymoronic
poison dripped murderous
reprieve into her blood's white water.

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Art

A Swiss Symbolist

by Mario Naves

The Swiss painter Ferdinand Hodler (1853–1918) is known to American audiences primarily as a precursor of twentieth-century Expressionism. Combining Symbolist imagery and Post-Impressionist facture, Hodler's signature paintings have been compared to those of Munch, Klimt, and Gauguin, all of whom were his contemporaries. In Switzerland he is something of a national treasure, although in his own day the Swiss often found him to be a source of scandal and a target of ridicule. Few things, however, are more forgiving than historical perspective coupled with national chauvinism. Organized by the Swiss Institute for Art Research, in cooperation with the Arts Council of Switzerland, the Hodler retrospective currently touring the United States is an attempt at gaining critical credibility for the work outside of his native country.[1] Are the paintings of such quality that he should be considered a figure of international import? Unless a contrived hocus-pocus becomes the standard by which we judge art, one would be hesitant to bet on it.

"Ferdinand Hodler: Views & Visions" is the first retrospective of the artist's work to be seen in the United States since 1972. (An exhibition of Hodler's landscapes toured the States in 1987.) It brings together fifty-six paintings encompassing his career as an artist, ranging from student work to *Lake Geneva with Montblanc at Dawn*, painted in the final year of his life. As installed at the National Academy of Design in New York, "Views & Visions" is simply presented and briskly paced. It never feels overblown. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of Hodler's paintings. Indeed, the artist revealed here is one whose link to modernism is, at best, tangential. He is, as it turns out, not a pioneer Expressionist but a nineteenth-century academic whose relationship with the new painting was that of a dabbler.

Hodler's early paintings evince a solid talent. His genre scenes, portraits, and landscapes are the work of an able, and sometimes brashly confident, artist—*Portrait of Louise-Delphine Duchosal* (1885) is the most assured painting Hodler ever did. But even in these early paintings one can see portents of an artist prone to overstatement. Despite its skillful interplay of blacks, grays, and rust-browns, *The Student Self-Portrait* (1874) is remarkable mainly for it's self-mythologizing. Yet even in his corniest paintings Hodler was capable of grace notes. If the

1 "Ferdinand Hodler: Views & Visions" opened at the National Academy of Design, New York, on November 18, 1994, and remains on view through January 15, 1995. The exhibition, organized by Hans A. Lüthy and Peter Fischer of the Swiss Institute for Art Research, Zurich, originated at the Cincinnati Art Museum and will travel to the Art Gallery of Ontario (February 15–April 17, 1995) and the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut (May 8–July 8, 1995). A catalogue has been published by the Swiss Institute for Art Research (176 pages, $30 paper).

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title figure in *The Reaper* (*c.* 1878) is ennobled to the point of cliché, the landscape is nicely handled; the quick dabs of paint delineating the grass upon which he stands are pleasantly unprogrammatic and the light that emanates from the painting is convincingly rendered.

It is Hodler's Symbolist work that dominates the exhibition. This is, in part, a function of the National Academy's architecture: given the layout of the galleries, one tends to enter the exhibition somewhere in the middle, and the middle consists of Hodler's Symbolist paintings. It is difficult to avoid them. Of course, the curators wouldn't have it any other way. In his introduction to the catalogue, Hans A. Lüthy, who along with Peter Fischer organized "Views & Visions," writes that this emphasis is a means of informing the "rather indifferent attitude of the American public" toward Symbolist painting. Given the catalogue's poor translation, it is, perhaps, unfair to comment on this statement. But one likes to think that this "indifference" is less a matter of ignorance than an indication of a healthy stateside skepticism toward matters metaphysical.

Hodler was an artist keenly aware of his cultural isolation, and his turn to Symbolism was both inevitable and calculated. "My goal remains Paris," he wrote in 1891. "The German Swiss will not understand me until they see that I have been understood elsewhere; also, only then will I impress the French Swiss." One doesn't have to be versed in the arcana of Symbolism—or "parallelism," Hodler's variant thereof—to know that something spooky is going on in his paintings. They are filled with grim figures, in various states of undress, taking part in mysterious rituals or—as in *The Disillusioned II* (1892–93)—glumly pondering the fate of the cosmos. (Titles like *Communion with Infinity* are enough to scare off those not predisposed to Hodler's philosophical portentousness.) The paintings are theatrical and overdetermined. The mannered poses of Hodler's figures are bound to have contemporary viewers scratching their heads in befuddlement. They had not a few of Hodler's contemporaries doing likewise. His gaunt, distracted figures prompted one critic of the time to write of Hodler's "fetus-fetish," providing a memorable, if unfortunate, addition to the critical lexicon.

The most telling shortcoming of Hodler's Symbolist painting is his handling of the human form. It is here that his drawing falters considerably. The nude woman in *Magnificence of Lines II* (*c.* 1908), for instance, is clumsily situated and awkwardly distorted, as is the title figure in *The Enchanted Boy II* (1894). This isn't a matter of skill, or lack thereof: Hodler's early work is that of a capable draftsman. Yet, in the Symbolist paintings, his distortions don't make sense *pictorially*, the way those of El Greco (or Max Beckmann) always do. Hodler could not conceive of the figure as an integral element of the painting's structure; the human form was simply a tool for representing ideas. Consequently, he was incapable of making a figure and ground relationship dynamic or, at least, interesting. His environments are little more than sets in which his actors ruminate. Hodler's advocates may claim that this inconsistency represents the dichotomy between worldly flesh and higher planes of being. Perhaps, but then we are in the realm of illustration, and not very good illustration at that. Hodler's Expressionist devices are indistinguishable from bad drawing.

This is especially true in the paintings depicting the illness and death of Hodler's mistress, Valentine Godé-Darel. Here again his distortions of form are arbitrary and unfelt. *The Sick Valentine Godé-Darel* (1914) is the finest of these paintings because it forgoes Expressionist melodrama to concentrate on observed particulars: the handsome contour of Godé-Darel's profile, the feeble tilt of her hand. Similarly, Hodler's best portraits are those unfettered by Symbolist "meaning." *Portrait of Matthias Morhardt* (*c.* 1912), with its unlabored surfaces and off-the-cuff linear accents, is refreshingly forthright. Hodler created his finest paintings when confronted with the mundane.

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And so it is with his landscapes, a body of work that constitutes Hodler's true legacy. Hodler thought of landcape painting as a form of relaxation from more ambitious and, one presumes, worthy subjects. Yet it is precisely because he did relax that the landscapes succeed as art; instead of imbuing his landscapes with the intangible, he simply *painted*. (Like many academics, Hodler never knew his own strengths.) The greatest of these paintings is *Landscape Rhythm of Forms: Lake Geneva with Clouds* (1909), with its minimalist play of brushstrokes spread horizontally over the painting's surface. Here Hodler's painthandling is concise and unforced, giving forth a soft light in broad planes of color. Ironically, here may be the one time that Hodler did capture the spirituality he had always strived for.

While it would be misguided to assert that his landscapes are equal to those of, say, Cézanne, it would be folly to deny their pleasures, just as it would be to claim his modest achievement for anything more than it is. Despite its efforts to the contrary, "Views & Visions" confirms the marginality of Hodler's *oeuvre*. He remains, very much, a local hero.

Exhibition notes

"Greek Gold: Jewelry of the Classical World"
at the Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York. December 2, 1994–March 4, 1995

Gold was the most appropriate material for statues of the gods in antiquity, according to Pliny, because its ethereal cast, radiant and incorruptible, was like that of divine flesh. Many bronze sculptures of gods were covered with it in the Classical period; Hellenistic rulers, having learned the power of images from Alexander the Great, often had their own portraits gilded for glory, and so did the Roman emperors.

Gold, *chrysos* in Greek, was highly refined in antiquity, commonly used almost entirely purified of its natural silver and copper components, in a state roughly equivalent to our modern twenty-two-carat standard. (A gold coin was divided into twenty-four *keratia* in Byzantine times.) Portable, gold was an important part of private wealth. In the form of coins, it was hoarded; in the form of jewelry, it was worn. Even the wreaths of fluttering gold oak, olive, or myrtle leaves, quintessential honorifics for the dead or gifts for the gods, whose images were often bedecked with them, may have been worn ceremonially at times by living mortals.

The diaspora of Athenian craftsmen at the end of the Peloponnesian War, and the probable emigration of goldsmiths from all over the Mediterranean throughout the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. to centers where gold was plentiful, encouraged a common language of designs in Classical Greek jewelry. Styles reveal a distinctive simplicity and elegance of form no longer dependent on Eastern examples (as during the prior three centuries). They maintain the astonishing technical brilliance that, in some critical features, like the careful alignment of sometimes almost powder-fine granulation, modern goldsmiths find inimitable.

"Greek Gold: Jewelry of the Classical World" is now at the Met after opening in London last June. Selected by Dyfri Williams, keeper of the Greek and Roman Department at the British Museum, the exhibition draws on the collections of the British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. It is organized by areas of production, not by chronology, with the very worthwhile purpose of revealing regional preferences and workshops. The demonstration succeeds most dramatically with the material from Scythian tombs on the north shore of the Black Sea (called the Pontos by the Greeks), which, except for two objects, are all on loan from the Hermitage, where the exhibition will be shown this summer.

In the three rooms dedicated to the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century excavations on the Taman peninsula in South Russia and in the Crimea (Ukraine), some unusually well-preserved jewelry is on dis-

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play. While some of the forms can be found elsewhere, others are completely unlike the Classical jewelry from any other geographical area, manifestly effected by the taste and interests of the nomadic, non-Greek patrons. Perhaps most impressive of the objects of unambiguously Scythian taste is the famous gold torque from Kul Oba, a rigid necklace of six gold rods twisted together in an open hoop. Each end terminates in a long collar decorated with filigree and blue and green enamel from which extrudes, as if in bravura climax, the forepart of a little horse ridden by a clothed and lank-haired Scythian who is modeled, burnished, and chased to express his individuality with the volumetric quality of major sculpture.

This look of monumentality enhances many of the gold human and animal forms that enliven this exhibition. The rearing, confronting rams that terminate a pair of hoop bracelets from the Great Bliznitza kurgan betray an understanding worthy of the great nineteenth-century French animal sculptor Antoine-Louis Barye. Massive in appearance, like most of these small sculptures they are made of sheet-gold worked in halves and soldered together over a resin core with details added. Some of the miniature human figures were inspired by large sculpture. In the Greek mainland and islands section of the exhibition, the earring pendants of Zeus in eagle form, carefully lifting a solid gold Ganymede up to Mount Olympos in his talons, reflect, at least in conception, the famous fourth-century sculpture of this event by Leochares.

The Ganymede earrings, from the Met's collection, are presumed to come from northern Greece, which, together with the North Pontic region, is our major source of Greek jewelry, thanks not only to Macedonian wealth at the time of Philip II and Alexander but to the Macedonians' predilection for depositing jewelry with their dead. This custom was not so pervasive in other areas of the Greek Classical world, certainly not in conservative Athens, from which we have, as an alert visitor to the exhibition will notice, very little jewelry.

"Greek Gold" was seen at the British Museum from June 21 through October 23, 1994, and will be on view at the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg from May through August, 1995. A catalogue, written by Dyfri Williams and Jack Ogden, has been published by the Trustees of the British Museum and Harry N. Abrams (256 pages, $45; $35 paper).

—Beryl Barr-Sharrar

"John Constable:
Drawings, Watercolors, Oil Sketches,
and Paintings from a Private Collection"
at the Frick Collection, New York.
November 15, 1994–February 12, 1995

In art, the danger of familiarity is not contempt but inattention. The bucolic subject matter of John Constable's art is so familiar that we are constantly tempted to relax our attention just when we need our wits at their sharpest and most percipient. The difficulty of Constable is that he is superficially so easy. In our mind's eye, we have trod through Stour Valley, past Constable's hay wains and ramshackle locks and cathedrals hundreds of times. But what have we seen? Having gazed upon Constable's *Hay Wain* in the Salon of 1824, Delacroix saw enough to drop everything and go to England to study Constable's work. Delacroix was certainly more exotic than Constable. But who, finally, was the more daring? The painter and critic Patrick Heron has called Constable "the single most revolutionary influence on western painting in the last hundred and seventy years." Delacroix would have understood what Mr. Heron was getting at. It is more difficult for us. Why? Writing in 1908, the German art critic Julius Meier-Graefe observed that Constable's art "did not reveal certain hitherto unnoted aspects of a given object . . . but simply variations of the beautiful, which is eternal." Part of the problem is that we have lost sight of the realities that words like "beautiful" and "eternal" name. We have taken this to be part of our modern cleverness; but perhaps it is part of the

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handicap, the damage, that makes us assume that Constable is familiar, easy, aesthetically dispensable.

The Frick's remarkable exhibition of nearly one hundred works by Constable is a good antidote to this presumption. Spanning the artist's entire career, from the early 1800s through the mid-1830s (Constable died in 1837, in his sixty-second year), the exhibition, from the collection of David Thomason in Toronto, consists almost entirely of works that have never been seen before in this country. The Frick owns two mature and highly finished masterpieces by Constable, *The White Horse* (1819) and *Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Garden* (1826), which are on view in its permanent galleries. This exhibition, in the Frick's basement galleries, concentrates on the more intimate, more "essayistic" side of Constable. There are some fairly elaborate oil paintings and portraits on view, but most of the works are sketches of one sort or another: nature studies, efforts at capturing the elusive disposition of a landscape or a meteorological effect. Not every sheet is a success, but the total effect of the exhibition is breathtaking. Again and again, one finds oneself exclaiming, What draftsmanship! To quote from Patrick Heron again, "In every square millimetre there is the double experience for the eye—it savours the design of marks at the surface at the same instant that it sinks through and beyond the grey of pencil and the white of paper to the depths of the outdoor spaces so miraculously evoked."

Constable went to school with Hobbema, Ruysdael, and other Dutch masters of landscape painting, but his mature work displays a freedom and personality that is all his own. Many of the sketches on view here were dashed off *in situ*: quick, bold sallies to fix the atmospherics of fugitive particularity on paper. In Meier-Graefe's judgment, Constable "is never greater than here." This is, he thought, partly because Constable's finished pictures tend to betray an inhibiting "respect for an obsolete guild prescription," but also because of the extraordinary vitality and spontaneity he infuses into his sketches. "It may be said of him," Meier-Graefe concluded, "that no one before him dealt so naturally with art." This naturalness is especially evident in what is perhaps the high point of the exhibition: the suite of cloud studies that Constable did on Hampstead Heath in 1821–22. These oil sketches, which typically bear Constable's notation of the day, hour, and weather conditions on their backs, are physically small, most less than a foot square. But they communicate such an intensity of vision that one can almost sense the clouds scudding across the horizon. But do not bother to consult a picture book to experience this: Constable's animation is completely lost in reproduction. These treasures must be seen in person or not at all.

A larger version of this exhibition was shown at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London from July 13 through October 16, 1994. Another version will be on view at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto from May 3 through July 9, 1995.

—*Roger Kimball*

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Theater

Two theaters, fat & thin

by Mark Steyn

"It's never too late to change," says Mike Ockrent. "We all have it within ourselves to alter the way we approach our fellow man." Ockrent himself has certainly changed. Until the mid-Eighties, he was a thoughtful stager of Peter Nichols, Willy Russell, and the other stalwarts of British subsidized theater. Then his revival of *Me and My Girl* at Leicester Haymarket transferred to the West End and New York and suddenly, to Jimmy Nederlander and the other Broadway hit men, he was Mister Showbiz. Today, he's the most successful musical-comedy director around, mainly because he's the only musical-comedy director around, excepting George Abbott, who's almost 108 and not as active as he once was. *Me and My Girl* is a harmless piece of Thirties jollity about a Cockney sparrer who inherits an earldom. Every now and then, I get Ockrent to explain to me how he approached the show as a Brechtian indictment of the British class system. Then I go see the thing and all I remember is the exchange between the butler and the new earl: "Apéritif, my lord?" "No, thanks, I've got me own"—the joke being (forgive me if this textual analysis is redundant) that the Cockney has assumed the butler is offering him a set of false teeth, a misunderstanding easily made as the Lambeth accent tends to substitute "f" for "th." A couple of years later, Ockrent told me he saw *Crazy for You* as a defense of public subsidy for the arts. When I'd finished rolling around on the floor weeping with laughter, he said sternly: "You may not see it that way, Mark. But, when you're working on the piece, you need a big idea. It's not enough to say, 'Let's make a fluffy soufflé. You have to have some meat in there as well.'"

Actually, I think that Ockrent's right. One of the reasons his soufflés are so devastatingly successful is that, to Moulinex the metaphor, all those candy canes are tapping away on a solid haunch of venison. Even the most inane musical comedy needs some sort of underpinning: Cockney inherits an earldom; it's *about* something. The principals in that original *Me and My Girl* were Robert Lindsay and a young Emma Thompson: actors, not song 'n' dance types. Ockrent accepted the corny jokes and take-home tunes as a given, but directed it as seriously as *Passion Play*. Sometimes what you need in a director is someone who'll play against the text; what you usually get is someone who merely exaggerates it, unbalancing it, transforming it into a caricature of itself: if Jack O'Brien had staged Tom Stoppard's dense particle-physics drama *Hapgood* (Mitzi Newhouse Theatre) the way he staged his moronic cartoon of *Damn Yankees* and vice versa, both productions would be vastly improved.

Instead, the theater pushes itself into opposing one-track cul-de-sacs. By happy coincidence, this December produced two extreme examples of the dominant schools of American drama. By a more remarkable coincidence, both shows were adaptations

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of the same source material: *A Christmas Carol*. At the Paramount, you get ninety performers, a horse, an earthquake, and snow falling in the auditorium; at the Richard Rodgers, you get Patrick Stewart doing the whole lot solo. Between them, these two adaptation exercises form a brilliant distillation of contemporary theater: today, to peruse Ockrent's menu in broader terms, it's either All-U-Can-Eat or No-Fat Lite, either very big or very small. No trickle-down economics here, just a bleak correlation: as the musicals get bigger, the plays get smaller. The more the musicals ape movies—the Paramount had surroundsound FX and a score by Disney's Alan Menken—the more the plays look like small-town library readings. On the one hand, *Beauty and the Beast*; on the other, *Vita & Virginia*. The latter has more snob appeal, true, but it exemplifies the same defeatism, the same admission that theater is so peripheral to cultural life that it's no longer a form but only a venue: your favorite movie live on stage! you've read the Bloomsbury correspondence, now see the show!

The director at the Paramount is Mike Ockrent, cast against type. *A Christmas Carol* already has meat; Ockrent was brought in to add the soufflé. He throws a $12 million budget at Dickens and buries him. Walter Charles is almost invisible, a Scrooge reduced to a stooge. Instead of an epiphany, he recovers his conscience apparently by being flown slowly over the orchestra. Yes, you can be a miser and mean-spirited, but the modern musical's problem is the opposite: it's opulent, lavish, profligate—and still mean-spirited. You don't give two hoots about anyone in Ockrent's *Christmas Carol*, any more than you do in *Show Boat*. These productions get away with it because they're pre-bought hit titles.

While the Paramount offers up its Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come—a nightmare world of seasonal spectaculars in unsuitable venues where the stage is so over-crowded and over-amplified you can't tell whether it's Scrooge, the thirty-kid choir, or the horse who's talking—Patrick Stewart at the Richard Rodgers offers the reassuring Ghost of Christmas Past, a rich, fruity evocation of the old radio Dickens, of Barrymore and Welles. None of your white-tuxedoed *This Is Your Life* TV hosts (Ockrent's realization of the Past Ghost): instead, we're told, this is Dickens for "purists."

Literary purists maybe, but not theatrical ones. Leaving aside that Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* for the dough and that, were he around, he'd probably be down at the Paramount arguing with Ockrent about the split on the libretto royalties, what has literary purity to do with theater? *Beauty and the Beast* is routinely reviled as a mere Disney marketing franchise rather than a theater piece in its own right. But you could say the same of all these one-man or two-woman shows currently doing the rounds. The "biologue" requires almost religious devotion from its adherents: for me, the defining image of the genre was the British actor Peter Barkworth receiving his ovation at the close of his Siegfried Sassoon evening and triumphantly waving his battered copy of the Collected Works. At *Vita & Virginia* (Union Square Theatre), every word comes from the original letters. But what's that got to do with play-making? At worst, it's saddling yourself with a built-in defect and trumpeting it as a virtue; at best, it's as meaningless a boast as saying that every inch of your curtains was taken from the original wallpaper.

Strange how players who will blithely amend dialogue especially written for the stage make such a fuss about textual fidelity when it comes to printed sources. But the biologue commands a fierce loyalty from its performer, perhaps because of the absence of any broader creative team. Most are devised by their players: Bob Kingdom with *Dylan Thomas*, Rosaleen Linehan with *Mother of All The Behans*, Eileen Atkins with *A Room of One's Own*, and now *Vita & Virginia*. Sometimes, the director is an actor, too: on *Dylan Thomas* (Perry Street Theatre), it's Anthony Hopkins. In straitened theatrical times, the biologue is a sort of seasonal

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insurance policy for actors: while you're waiting for that major motion picture or the call from Andrew Lloyd Webber, it's an inexpensive little vehicle which some college town or fringe venue is sure to pick up. The complaint about *Cats* and *Les Miz* is that eventually every major city will be offering the same five ghastly British musicals. But the same is true of the biologue: I've seen *Mother of All The Behans* in Edinburgh, *Vita & Virginia* in Chichester and the West End, *Dylan Thomas* in . . . was it Hammersmith? Quality has nothing to do with it, either: *Dylan Thomas* is a tour de force by Bob Kingdom; *Mother of All The Behans* is a tiresome ragbag of Irish clichés with less theatricality than an illustrated lecture with slides. Yet it makes no difference: they're both about boozy self-destructive Celts, they both get on.

If *Cats* is the McDonald's of the theatrical circuit, these shows are—what?—the Ben and Jerry's? A better image, generally perceived as ideologically sound and less harmful to the environment, but somehow irritatingly smug in their virtuousness. For one thing, actors only do biologues about people with whom they identify—in other words, *like*. Barkworth and Atkins revere Sassoon and Woolf, which is not, in theatrical terms, an interesting motivation. The very acceptance of the role seems to imply approval, which is why we get to see Vanessa Redgrave as Vita Sackville-West but not as, say, Mrs. Thatcher in the new one-woman show *Maggie!* The nearest we come to disapproval is in Bob Kingdom's companion piece to *Dylan Thomas*, *The Truman Capote Talk Show*. After seeing him peel away the almost brutal self-loathing of Thomas, you sense Kingdom's feelings about Capote, and the narcissism and name-dropping, are—good gracious!—mixed. Also, Kingdom is Welsh and Capote is not. Most of the time, the biologue offers an identification between subject and interpreter so literal it's an insult to the craft of acting: the Welshman plays the Welshman, the Irishwoman the Irishwoman.

Again, it's the big musicals which are despised for their choice of subject matter. Yet it's the small plays which are exclusively hung up on writers who die in the Great War, writers who commit suicide, writers who drink themselves to death. It's curious that, whenever an actor constructs a theatrical evening himself, it's about a writer who had the decency to self-destruct. In London recently, David Hare was complaining about the problems he had getting his work produced. If only he'd had the good sense to have an affair with Violet Trefusis and then be found under Waterloo Bridge face down in a gallon of industrial alcohol, he'd have no problem: Eileen and Vanessa would be fighting for the lead role in *Hare Today, Gone Tomorrow: The Brief Lives of David Hare*; Martha Stewart would be starring in her own adaptation of David Hare's Favorite Yuletide Recipes.

Vita & Virginia explores the two women's relationship through their correspondence, with the minimal assistance of a bench, a plastic hedge, and some gloomy and erratic lighting. They were women of strikingly different temperament: Virginia older and inhibited, Vita younger and flamboyant—and that's about it as far as any stage tension is concerned. There must have been more going on—the sex didn't last long, but the friendship endured—but the great failing of the play is that, notwithstanding the skillful sophisticated stage footwork of Atkins and Redgrave, you have absolutely no sense of what these women were *really* like together. I've now seen the piece thrice, and each time I've come away marveling at the intensity and passion of the performances and unable to recall a single thing about them the following morning. I think it's because it's acting for its own sake: not in the service of any drama, but acting about acting. You dimly recollect Eileen Atkins's lop-sided smile or her face crumpling and collapsing, but you can't remember *why* she smiled or crumpled.

Miss Atkins, having Woolfed her way through most of the author's work, is clearly fascinated by the friendship with Vita, but

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her chosen form cripples the subject from the start. Despite the much vaunted claims of "authenticity," the play is a lie. Miss Atkins has taken the letters and then either chopped them up and parceled them out as dialogue or used them for soliloquies. But not one word we hear on stage was ever intended to be spoken. It's not just that the tone eventually becomes suffocating and self-regarding, it's that dialogue lifted from letters can sometimes be a reflection of character, sometimes an expression of it, but never, never a revelation of it. Redgrave and Atkins have immersed themselves in Vita and Virginia, in their facial tics and vocal inflections, without spotting the fatal flaw—they're not playing Vita and Virginia, they're playing their letters. In strict Stanislavskian terms, to prepare for this role you should climb into a lavender envelope and lie mouldering at the back of a drawer for a couple of decades.

The content broadly breaks down thus: the passionate and the personal is too controlled, too aware; all the rest is small talk, even when it's big talk. Of the day that His Majesty's Government recognized Franco, Vita writes: "Harold said yesterday's meeting of the House of Commons was glum in the extreme." This is a classic biologue line: the first half has been elongated for clarity, so that the second half, granted the inadequacy of the observation, fails even as a slice of authentically tiresome schoolgirl vernacular. As the manly Sapphic stag, Redgrave's spin on each line is to give distracted little glances into the wings. Funnily enough, whoever plays Vita winds up giving distracted sidelong glances all the time. It's as if they're vaguely ashamed to catch your eye with this stuff.

There's nothing wrong with this crowd, as long as we don't kid ourselves as to why we're interested in them. Leonard and Virginia Woolf published fourteen of Vita's books, and more fool them. But at Union Square and around the world producers and publishers continue to make the same mistake. A few years ago, calling on Diana Mosley in Paris, I brought her a new edition of a Violet Trefusis novel by the feminist publishing house Virago. "Oh, that really is too funny," she said, screaming with laughter. "We're only interested in Violet because she was such an enormously amusing lesbian. She was a perfectly terrible writer." On the *Christmas Carol* principle, I think we're entitled to ask for an alternative *Vita & Virginia*, staged at the Paramount with a ninety-strong chorus of minor Bloomsbury bisexuals, a lavish afternoon-tea scene with Penelope Betjeman's horse, a duet for Lord Berners and Salvador Dalí from inside their diving helmets (with throat mikes), a flock of Berners' multi-colored dyed pigeons defecating on the audience, and a triumphant finale from Vita and Violet singing "We Get A Kick Out of Us." We complain when the big musicals bloat and trivialize things, but the traffic runs both ways: its ludicrous that an inherently bloated and trivial subject like Vita is presented with tremulous, overwrought, finger-sandwich sensitivity. Come in, Mike Ockrent.

As it is, *Vita & Virginia* has an almost admirable shamelessness about it. There's no dramatic arc to the piece. It starts, it putters on, and then, about twenty minutes before the end, it gradually winds down. Miss Atkins is no playwright, which is her affair; but I resent the implication that the very lack of structure or trajectory makes the piece somehow more truthful. The late Jule Styne, whose instinctive stage savvy I respected enormously, regularly turned down biodrama projects with a simple question: "What's your First Act finale?" *Ike, the Musical*: he wins the war, he becomes President, he gets re-elected, he retires; where's your story? The striking thing about Styne's *Gypsy* is that it's such an effective stage biography you don't even notice it's a stage biography: Mama Rose and all the rest become living, breathing characters in their own rights. Today, we live in a world where fiction and character have been largely replaced by celebrity and gossip. All those TV movies about women who get raped on the roadside and taken to a hospital only to discover the doctor treating them is the rapist, all of them proudly labeled "Based on a true

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story." But it infects the theater, too: it's significant that Tony Kushner's best-drawn character in *Angels in America* is Roy Cohn—the one we already know.

Meanwhile, for living writers, there's good news. Why commit suicide and let Eileen Atkins play you on stage? Instead, write a play about yourself and take the lead role. That's what Elizabeth Fuller does in New York's other two-woman show, *Me and Jezebel* (Actors' Playhouse). Me is Miss Fuller, played by Miss Fuller; Jezebel is Bette Davis, who came to dinner in the spring of 1985 and wound up staying for a month. Two thoughts here: the first is that we all know who Sheridan Whiteside is *really* meant to be, but at least Kaufman and Hart went to the trouble of fictionalizing him; the second is that, to her credit, Miss Fuller has done what Miss Atkins has not—instead of a chronological plod through the years, she has focused her celebrity biologue on a specific episode. There are some neat anecdotes, especially the one where Miss Fuller takes Davis to McDonald's. But anecdotes is all they are—and, with impressionist Louise DuArt flouncing around and dragging on the cigarettes, the sense that this is no more than an amusing party piece is complete. There is a play in this promising source material, but this isn't it. *Me and Jezebel* started at the Ballroom, a cabaret spot, and that's really its level: it's an amusing dinner-party story. If you and your companions can't be bothered making your own brittle bitchy anecdotes, then you might as well have it catered by Miss Fuller. But even the theater's ambitions aren't yet that impoverished. For this theatergoer, the Christmas offerings were most pertinently summed up by a famous saloon bar exchange recounted by Bob Kingdom in *Dylan Thomas*: "I'm writing a play." "Neither am I."

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Dance

Smokeless "Cigarettes": Pina Bausch at BAM

by Laura Jacobs

The relationship between the foot and the floor is where every choreographer begins. Toes sheathed in stiff pink satin, classical ballet makes a formal statement, though within that pretty syntax of flat, demi-, and full pointe there is room for huge variation. The ballets of George Balanchine, for instance, with their *en l'air* air, offer up a long-distance affair, the supple satin touching down with deep soul kisses, loving then leaving. In the *à terre* realm of Antony Tudor, the floor is firm and authoritarian, the sad earth straining under highly charged arches. Meanwhile, modern dance continues to echo Isadora's *cri de coeur*: the smack of the full bare foot, five little piggies going to market (decades later Mark Morris's aural homage was the sound of his beefy feet on the boards). The experimental Pina Bausch, doyenne of Dada movement theater and director of Germany's Tanztheater Wuppertal, marks her territory by stuffing the piggies into stilettos, sending them wee-wee-wee all the way home.

Bausch's stiletto says other things, too. It approximates ballet's pointe shoe in the way it cocks the ankle and ups the arch, yet stiffens the women's (and sometimes the men's) connection to the floor. It grounds the stage in a social milieu—the offstage, adult world—yet flirts with fetish, that hairy underworld intimated in the unshaven legs that rise out of those high heels. When Bausch dancers kick off their pumps, which they wear with the confidence of Nazi commandants, they bump down with a harummph, stripped of some erotic power, culturally undressed. Their ballgowns crumple at the hem like musty old mansions. A Bausch evening, you realize, takes place in those three to four inches between nature and nurture, good and evil, and just about any other dichotomy one cares to name. It's a tight crawlspace.

The work Bausch brought to Brooklyn Academy of Music this November was *Two Cigarettes in the Dark*, a piece from 1985 whose revival is part of Bausch's twentieth-anniversary season. It is a kinder, gentler Pina we see in *Cigarettes*—no *coup de théâtre* like the falling cinderblock wall of *Palermo, Palermo*, no patrolling German shepherds as in *Carnations*, none of the wrenched sexual warring of her *Rite of Spring*—just the usual collage of short bits, recurring activities, and absurdist dialogue gathered within a stage structure that sets the conceptual agenda. What *Cigarettes* does do is exhale an unusually self-justifying sigh.

"Why don't you come in, my husband is at war." With this vaguely perverse welcome, company veteran Mechthild Grossmann strolls to the footlights and invites us into the set, a huge empty room with oddly-placed doors—a human terrarium. The metaphor is unmissable, because nestled into each of the three white walls is a picture window housing a different ecosystem: desert, aquarium, jungle. Framed by the fourth

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wall, or rather, "window," the set itself is a control space, a sort of asylum. Or is it a manor (manner?) house like the one in Jean Renoir's *Rules of the Game*, only with no rules, mystifying manners?

The next thing we see is a sinewy young woman in a strapless white satin gown, shoeless, her hair stringy. She launches into an artful, repetitious fit—is she insane or a saint? Without question she is annoying, a winter tree with beady eyes. When she crouches on the floor stuffing her cheeks with breadcrumbs, she's the squirrel in her own branches. During her windblown fits, she flails her arms so that her naked torso pulls out of her gown as if that bodice were the last irritating leaf. Later she throws herself against walls, a bucket roped to her waist.

And so it goes. Two men in tuxedos toast each other and then dribble water down their chins. Four women perform handstands against a wall. A wooden board held up by the men becomes a slide the women take turns on, a funereal exercise. These are just three scenes in a three-hour evening of them—the pick is random. Other events seem to mean more. A man keeps leaping forward, attempting to take off. A woman tries to make a carpet fly with frantic spoken spells and conjuring calls, to no avail. Another woman's slippers are nailed to the floor. Someone lobs an egg into the air, thinking paper wings will keep it aloft. (They don't.)

Doomed is the human hope for transcendence.

And so transcendence in the theater is a lie too, Bausch seems to say, as are the usual compositional paths that lead to it. Later in the evening Grossmann complains, "Well to me this is not a bit understandable," and it's not only an acknowledgment that there's nothing to follow in Bausch, it's a jokey undercutting of our desire for direction, for kinetic quickening, climb, verge, lift. Even the work's title speaks of detumescence, of quiet come down. The big set piece that is the "peak" of the evening is a big, damp valley. To an extended stretch of music—unusual in Bausch, who uses sound as semiotics, not as a parallel art—eight performers in rows of two chug around the stage to Ravel's *La Valse*. The entire thing takes place plopped on the ground, the dancers keeling like survivors in a lifeboat, rolling on buttocks and ankles, their feet useless. If this feels like it looks, the dancers must hate doing it. The chug-a-lug goes on forever, Ravel's swoops and waves washing the stage. Clearly we are witnessing a Bausch "tour de force," a grand gesture in which she passes judgment on grander gestures, downscaling Walter Pater—all great art aspires to the state of *escape*.

Bausch is frequently attacked on the grounds of her angst-ridden outlook, her ongoing observation that females are batty masochists and males either pathetic sadsacks or tenacious tormentors or both. But actually, everyone gets his turn to humiliate another, to do penance on the floor. It's nothing personal, just Pina's vision of the world as a Ship of Fools in which the stiletto heel is as good a weapon as any—and hard to trace at that.

In fact, in 1984 (a year before *Two Cigarettes*), Bausch had an acting part in Fellini's *And the Ship Sails On*. She was a blind woman, an ironic role for an artist who's frequently complimented on how much she takes in with her large round eyes—and an unintentionally truthful role too, for despite all the detail on her stage, all the strange transactions we've never seen before, it's amazing how little Bausch actually has to show us, and how tiring it is—the eternal niggling of the devil's advocate, that special sort of pain who postures and contradicts all the way to the infinity point, the plane where lines dissolve and the dialogue goes flat.

There are those who will take any kind of infinity they can get. To me Bausch's nonsensical openness, her refusal to risk overcontrolling her theater in terms of meaning or momentum, is merely a different species of control. Her hound dogs are tone (heavy with paradox), tense (not quite past tense but "late" as in late in the day or recently

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dead), and a sense of time that is largely without tempo. She even employs temperature, what with pools of water onstage, steam irons, freezers, ice. These atmospherics are Bausch humours and they add up to theater that is at once aggressive and utterly without dynamics. Whether the dancers move fast or slow, it's the same speed; whether the moment is comic or tragic, it's the same mood. What passes for drama here does not arise from conflict, because conflict is built into every act; rather, it's not knowing what will happen next—if we cared more, this would be called suspense. Completion, conclusion is verboten of course; as Bausch once said, "I sometimes think that I have been working on the same piece for twenty years." Forget a tonic or dominant pleasure. This is art as head game, an onstage prelude to the après-show analysis where Bausch really begins and the audience has to do all the work. Again.

Bausch's bridled ego is as oppressive as other artist's unbridled ones. Forced to choose, I'll take the latter, with its attendant fire and foot-pawing. As it happens, Martha Graham Dance Company was at BAM a month before Bausch got there, putting on its Radical Graham program, a selection of the early Graham masterpieces from the 1930s and '40s (*Appalachian Spring*, *Cave of the Heart*, *Primitive Mysteries*, etc.). Talk about dichotomy. Two mistresses of the stage whose subjects—sex and death and art—are not so dissimilar, yet what a difference. Beginning with the hairdos. Bausch pulls her black hair back into a thin ponytail; Graham pulled her black hair back too, but added a bun the size of a cantaloupe (or a conundrum—Paul Taylor used to wonder how it stayed on). Where Bausch's eyes see busy emptiness, Graham's blazed. And she didn't demur; you couldn't stop her from explaining life. Maybe that bun was some sort of cosmic message center.

The Graham Company's current roster is dutifully strong at the top, with Terese Capucilli and Christine Dakin turning out detailed, somewhat overly determined performances. Still, they were just right in the return of 1958's *Clytemnestra*, for me a surprisingly accessible and engaging first viewing of Graham's take on the labyrinthine tale—a fresh and glittering pageant. But it's the women who filled the lower ranks that thrill, perhaps the most beautiful bunch of sirens onstage today. With their Man Ray waistlines, their expressive backs and sturdy feet (there's no heel like a Graham heel, a jutting Hera's chin), these women are taut, tawny supplicants. You can't tell if they've been poured from royal honey or sculpted from tusk.

Which makes it that much easier to see the formal brilliance of Graham's breakthrough dances—the ferocious attack, the assurance in asymmetry, the rosewood craft, the supreme confidence in dance dynamics. Those quick little footsteps beneath the hem of clinging columns of cloth, a Graham trademark, achieve an amazing, almost illogical speed, like mice shooting along the curb. How easily Graham made rhythm speak for emotion, realizing that the push and scurry of bare feet raised guardhairs, agitation, much more powerfully than a few leaps would. Throw a forward coil of the torso, a quick clench, over those scurries, as Graham did in *Steps in the Street* (1936), and you get tight little knotholes of air—gasps in the shadows. One of Graham's favorite subjects was fear—pure, flaming, irrational fear—and you find it even here, in a dance that's as much a compositional study as a mood piece. Escape was never an option.

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The media

The elections explained

by James Bowman

It is a foolish fancy, perhaps, but indulge me for a moment by making the assumption that the 1994 mid-term election results signified that a plurality of our voting fellow citizens wanted their rulers to think more as the Republicans than as the Democrats do. Just imagine, if you can, that more people liked the Republican "Contract with America" than liked what the Clinton administration has done for the past two years—or the Democratic Congress for the past forty. Far-fetched as these assumptions may seem to our political and media sophisticates, who are so well practiced at looking into the true and hidden meanings of such epiphenomena, suppose that the actual explanation of the election results were also the simplest. What then would we make of the veritable frenzy of analysis carried on by those same sophisticates in order to come up with subtler and more sinister explanations?

The hidden meanings of the Republican victory were not discoverable by just anybody. It took a special talent at ferreting out the secrets of right-wing appeal. Nor was there exactly unanimity among the subtlest of analysts. But, roughly speaking, their diagnosis of the social pathology so lamentably revealed by the late elections involved the adumbration of at least seven discrete but possibly overlapping syndromes, any one of which could easily be fatal to the cause of civilization and decency.

To start at the top:

Voter cynicism. As I noted in this space in the earliest phase of the electoral season, this was by far the most popular explanation for the mood of the voters, at least up until they voted. In fact, the "cynicism" of the public became The Story of the campaign, during which I lost count of the number of sober op-ed pieces which referred to the cynicism of the voters and the havoc it was wreaking on the prospects of incumbents, especially Democrats, for re-election. The idea swiftly became a staple of the news pages as well. "Cynicism" became shorthand for "Republican voting intentions." When a public opinion poll in October revealed that the Democratic candidate for the open seat of Governor of Maryland, Parris Glendening, led the Republican, Ellen Sauerbrey, *The Washington Post*'s lead to the story read: "Rejecting the cynicism rampant in other political races nationally, Maryland voters appear broadly confident the next governor will help solve the state's toughest problems."

To those whose unexamined political sympathies are activist and Democratic, I suppose it is natural to identify the caution and skepticism of conservative and Republican points of view as "cynical" by definition and thus to use the word "cynicism" to mean "sympathetic to Republicans." But this usage is sometimes rather comically at odds with more traditional ones. In a piece that ran on the *Washington Post* op-ed page after the

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election, David Walsh, chairman of the Department of Politics at the Catholic University of America, commended Hillary Rodham Clinton for expressing religious and moral sentiments in an interview in *Newsweek* just before the elections. Walsh wrote: "Whatever her political motives, it is hard to fault the courageous character of her profession of faith. In this time of even greater cynicism than usual, it took considerable gumption to face the gantlet of skepticism."

Now the time has been when it might have been said that a left-leaning politician who proclaims religious sympathies a week before an election in which the trend is rightward is herself behaving rather cynically. But to Walsh, not only did Mrs. Clinton's discovery of the Lord have nothing significantly to do with the pending election but it actually took courage for her to talk about it with all those cynical Republicans around! The First Lady as the hammer of "cynicism" was also the theme of Bob Cohn of *Newsweek* when he urged that Mrs. Clinton should take as the message of the electors a need for her to act as our "national Comforter-in-Chief, exhorting the nation to shed its poisonous cynicism as Roosevelt did in the Depression." It makes it easier for her, of course, if fighting against poisonous cynicism and fighting against poisonous Republicans are one and the same thing.

But as an explanation of the election results, cynicism began to seem too tame a word to describe the enormity of America's turn to the right. Besides, it is rather hip and fashionable to be cynical. Thus, the most hip and fashionable of commentators came to favor one or more of a range of alternative theories. For instance:

Voter immaturity. They don't come much more hip and fashionable than Peter Jennings, who recently escorted Barbra Streisand to a White House dinner. He it was who, in a radio commentary, downgraded "cynicism" into a mere fit of childish pique. "Imagine a nation full of uncontrolled two-year-old rage," he said, meaning rage of the sort commonly displayed by two-year-old children. "The voters had a temper tantrum last week . . . Parenting and governing don't have to be dirty words; the nation can't be run by an angry two-year-old." As a national TV personality with a rather avuncular relationship to his own audience, Jennings finds it natural to think of governing and "parenting" as analogous activities—and to speak like a Dutch uncle in urging voters to grow up. But those media performers whose relations with their audience are less familial than Peter Jennings's were more likely to incline to the theory of . . .

Voter viciousness. The "mean-spiritedness" of the electorate became almost as much a commonplace after the election as its "cynicism" had been before it. Evan Thomas of *Newsweek*, appearing on "Inside Washington," opined that

> America is in a heartless mood. They would throw all those babies in the snow if they could. We will see how they feel after it happens, but the impulse right now is to just take away all their benefits and kick them out. Now, four years from now, after people are dying in the streets, we'll have a different debate.

In a similarly apocalyptic vein, Richard Threlkeld of CBS News reckons that it will only take until next Thanksgiving before "major cuts in welfare and other social services" are likely to have closed down or overwhelmed the country's shelters for the homeless.

Bob Herbert, whose weekly effusions in *The New York Times* are collectively entitled "In America"—as if he were only visiting the place and reporting on it to the Swedes, or the Venusians (as, indeed, it often seems he is)—thundered that the election had revealed "something evil" which was "eating at the national soul." From the extra-American perspective it must be easier than it is for you and me to see, as Herbert does, that "the prosperous are on the march against the poor. In the new political climate, driven by talk radio and the emerg-

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ing Republican majority in Congress, no quarter is to be given, no mercy shown. Toddlers who can't ante up the price of their breakfast had better get used to the sound of their stomachs growling." Did you ever see a climate driven by more Satanic engines?

The glancing shot at talk radio also became more and more common, so that when Newt Gingrich alleged that a quarter of the White House staff had had trouble getting security clearances because of recent drug use, Leon Panetta compared him to "an out-of-control radio talk show host." That Panetta evidently considered this a stinging rebuke is an indication of the extent to which, in the iconography of the Left, the radio talk show host has become a metonym for what Al Gore (referring to the supporters of Oliver North) called during the campaign "the extra-chromosome right wing." (Rush Limbaugh immediately went on the air to bill himself as "America's most out-of-control radio talk show host.") But the Left is sorely in need of such circumlocutory resources in order ever so gingerly to hint at the theory of . . .

Voter stupidity. No one quite echoed the famous concession speech of Dick Tuck in California in 1966: "The people have spoken, the bastards," though Mark Shields quoted it wistfully before warning the Democrats not to "blame the customer." But there was a lot of subtextual puzzlement in the press about the voters' bizarre and irrational behavior. How could people have voted for a Republican Congress in the full knowledge of what they were doing? Since they obviously could not have done so, they must have imagined that they were voting not for Republicans but against incumbency or against Clinton or against gridlock or in favor of bipartisanship.

Likewise, the Republican "Contract with America," which before the election was the object of universal scorn among the punditry and regarded as a strategic blunder, sure to lead the Republicans to disaster, was reduced after the election to a series of self-evident absurdities—scooping up children indiscriminately and putting them in orphanages or balancing the budget while cutting taxes. And if any fool could see the stupidity of such an agenda, that made those who voted for it either cretinous or irrational. Thus there emerged a variety of explanations which involved a generalized "feeling" or "mood" among the people—a "cycle of frustration," as Ted Koppel put it on ABC, or "a real surliness afloat out there," in the words of Gwen Ifill on NBC. This floating surliness became especially popular as an explanation for the voters' evident irrationality, and gradually, in the repetition it transmuted into "outrage" or "anger" or, especially, . . .

White male anger. This was originally the favored explanation of such bastions of feminist thinking as the "Style" section of *The Washington Post* and dear old Betty Friedan, who was quoted in Lloyd Grove's report on the sombre mood at the eightieth-birthday party of *The New Republic* just after the election as having pronounced it "a manipulation of the frustrations that Americans, especially American men, rightly feel about the downsizing of their jobs." A month later the idea had become a commonplace. Gerald Seib of *The Wall Street Journal* was referring casually to "the underlying job insecurity of U.S. workers" which was self-evidently "the source of the anger in all those angry white males who went Republican," while Jim Hoagland in *The Washington Post* was asking Al Gore if "the angry white male vote was not a reaction to the administration's commitment to the empowerment of women."

In fact, the pollsters found that there *was* a considerable "gender gap" evident in the results—women went Democratic 54 to 46 percent while men went Republican 57 to 43 percent—but the putative "anger" was nothing more than the hypothesis of pundits who have long assumed, as some wives do, that any divergence of male and female points of view must be due entirely to masculine petulance. As Todd Gitlin put it in *The New York Observer*, "the recoil of white

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males is made up of fear and loathing. It's a defensive reaction . . . It's a huddling of men who resent the relative decline not only in their value on the labor market but in their power at home, on the street, in the office or factory." In similar vein, Ms. Friedan saw this "terrible setback for American democracy" as a result of the Republicans' having "manipulated that rage, in effect, to elect a Congress . . . that will destroy the middle class."

This, you might think, is remarkably short-sighted on their part, since so many of the people who voted for them in fact belong to that same doomed middle class. But there is apparently no limit to the stupidity of Republican voters. They will probably go on voting for such Congresses even after they have been destroyed by them. It was presumably in order to locate fauna of such striking intellectual limitations that the "Style" section sent its reporter Phil McCombs out to where the rural marshes of Maryland abut the more familiar suburbs. Phil bagged his limit of rednecks, having recognized them by their colorful garb. "He's wearing a wool check shirt with the tail hanging out, jeans, black boots and a white corduroy baseball cap that says 'White Tail.'" Phil knew that that was his man even before he spotted the N.R.A. pin on his cap.

Such people may be patronized—or, in Betty Friedan's case, matronized—but not taken seriously. "We need to remember how threatened some people are," McCombs told Joanna Byrd, the paper's ombudsman, when it was objected that some of his subjects had made racist remarks. "The *Post* covers the fancy parties in Washington, but some people really are suffering. And when the American pie starts shrinking, we [by which he presumably means "they"] get scapegoating." Mary Hadar, the assistant managing editor of "Style," agreed: "Sometimes if we bleep racist or sexist comments, we run the risk of leaving out an essential element of the story. Attitudes often come through in language." And, of course, the attitudes of those who use racial epithets, or who call, as one of McCombs's subjects does, the President of the United States "that faggot liberal draft dodger," can be at once pitied and disregarded. It is, you might say, a form of liberal "scapegoating."

White male anger, in other words, is merely displaced anxiety or insecurity, which in less primitive intelligences would presumably express itself in a less anti-social form than voting Republican. Steven Roberts of *U.S. News & World Report* put it most succinctly on Mary Matalin's show "Equal Time" on CNBC: "They are not voting Republican tonight, Mary, they are voting against a lot of unhappiness in their own lives." Well, *that's* cleared up then! The pundit-cum-social therapist has diagnosed voting Republican as a consequence of generalized "unhappiness" and so avoided considering it as anything but pathological behavior.

Thus, even in dismissing the Angry White Man as a stereotype to be placed alongside the black carjacker who was for a time supposed to have driven off with the children of Mrs. Susan Smith of Union, South Carolina, the compassionate Ellen Goodman of *The Boston Globe* affirmed the pathology associated with that stereotype. The voters were anxious, not angry, asserted Ms. G., and their anxiety was cranked up by radio talk shows, which she called (in the phrase of Ann Lewis) a "national electronic consciousness-raising session for men." Is this a mixed therapeutic metaphor? Can consciousness be "raised" to the level of pathology? Perhaps she meant "consciousness-lowering"? Anthony Lewis of *The New York Times* also found that "resentment of affirmative action on behalf of minorities and women" was "a significant factor in leading a high proportion of white men to vote Republican," but he also came up with a creative elaboration on the "anger" thesis in . . .

The anthropological explanation. In *The Golden Bough*, Sir James Frazer tells of the ancient custom of the tiny kingdom of Passier on the northern coast of Sumatra. According to the Portuguese historian De Barros, "no wise man would wish to be king of

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Passier, since the monarch was not allowed by his subjects to live long. From time to time a sort of fury seized the people, and they marched through the streets of the city chanting with loud voices the fatal words, 'The king must die!' When the king heard that song of death he knew that his hour had come." That the American people, like the ferocious subjects of the king of Passier, harbor a primal urge to destroy their own leaders was the thesis of Mr. Lewis, who had not hitherto been known as a social anthropologist.

In collaboration with an anonymous doctor—who first asked him the profound (and profoundly troubling) question: "Why do we want to kill our Presidents?"—he formulates a new hypothesis about American social psychology to explain the truncated political existences of Presidents Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Bush, and now, possibly, Clinton. It is this: Because, since FDR, we have come to expect so many things from our presidents—from an end to street crime to an improved standard of living—our exaggerated expectations set us up for inevitable disappointment and consequent regicidal impulses. "The kind of improvement people want is hard to achieve in the real world of the 1990s," mused Lewis, profoundly, in another column. As he did so, no doubt Ronald Reagan and George Bush gnashed their dentures with anguish and regret that this rather severe limitation on the power of the president to create at will prosperity and social peace should have been discovered by Dr. Lewis too late to moderate the savagery of his attacks on them.

On the bright side, there is in A. Lewis's view hope for Bill Clinton and other Democrats, who in order to win back the devotion of their people have only to learn "to talk honestly about the limits of what they can produce." If they do not do so, he thinks, "the present cynicism and anger may become dangerous" and "turn people against the whole idea of representative government." Thus it is that the Republican victory may be a stage on the road to fascism—as if we didn't know that already from all those orphanages that Newt Gingrich was said to be hell bent on setting up or from what Lewis identified in yet another column as Republican plans to "crack down on immigrants and the poor" and to force "millions of children" to line up in soup kitchens. Like Evan Thomas or Bob Herbert, Lewis seemed to take pleasure in contemplating what a lesson those starving children will be to the ungrateful people of this latter-day Passier.

But perhaps the most disturbing of all the media's attempts to explain to itself the inexplicable was . . .

The cannibalistic explanation. That is to say: the media must be seen as eating its own kind. Somehow, something has gone wrong and the press has turned on President Clinton and the Democrats as if they were—well, Republicans or something. As a result, the Republicans got in. A particularly subtle form of this view was promulgated by Walter Goodman in *The New York Times*. He got in the obligatory shot against "radio talk shows" (usually this expression is nothing more than code for "Rush Limbaugh" and his weekly audience of twenty million), calling them "encounter sessions for people on the edge," but he related them to other mass media, especially television, where simplistic solutions to social problems are prized. To Goodman, the salient feature of the election campaign was negative advertising, in the broadest sense, on TV.

"If you were in the business of concocting political advertisements about crime," he writes, "would you chance making your candidate sound like a wimp by mooning over the narrow choices for many young people in our cities or would you give him or her a manly, three-strikes-and-you're-out line to spout? That's the sort of 30-second solution deemed safe for large audiences, and the peddlers know their customers." Here the unspoken premise is that voters whose heads are stuffed by the media with simplistic solutions will be more likely to vote Republican. Like Betty Friedan and Anthony Lewis, Goodman sees such voters,

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among whom television has been "stirring up emotions and shutting down minds" as constituting a threat to representative government.

This explanation, it will be seen, naturally shades into that of the stupid voter. And those who use it must suppose the voters too stupid even to realize that they are being called stupid. Thus Joe Klein of *Newsweek* said that "the public seemed more intolerant than involved, uninterested in what the candidates have had to say, blindly voting *against*." And who is to blame for that? Klein writes: "The President might argue, with some justification, that it's the media's fault: we're allergic to good news." Of course the politicians cannot escape blame for having conducted a campaign that Robin Toner of *The New York Times* called "angry, deeply personal, powerfully ideological and exceedingly negative." She cites "analysts and scholars" who see in this negativity evidence of "the erosion of civility" as "the civic culture continues to fray, election by election," to the point where "even the basic comity that's necessary for the functioning of the system" is undermined. Golly! That almost sounds as if it could be more worrying than the Republican victory itself.

Well, maybe not quite. On the same day, Miss Toner's paper ran an editorial entitled "Newt Gingrich, Authoritarian," which accused Mr. Gingrich of having achieved his electoral ends by using the racist "code words" formerly associated with George Wallace and Barry Goldwater. It then went on to claim that the Republican majority "exists mainly to rubber stamp [Gingrich's] legislative menu" and that he believed "that intellectual dissent is unpatriotic and infuriating." It called the "Contract with America" "laughable as economics and sinister as social policy" and concluded that the secret of the new Republican leader's success was that he had "learned how to invoke a fictionalized vision of the American past and how then to whip the nostalgia for that nonexistent past into voter anger" as Ronald Reagan had done before him, but with "a meaner, more intolerant edge."

On the op-ed page the same day, Bob Herbert compared the Republicans to Visigoths and announced that they were about to "resume their war on urban America with a vengeance, targeting especially the elderly, the poor and the very young." Obviously, "the G.O.P. message," opined Herbert, "so simple and attractive, is a fraud." The following day, the old reliable, Anthony Lewis, saw no irony in attacking Gingrich thus: "Slash and burn, knife and smear: The Gingrich instincts are unrelenting. Herblock got it right in his *Washington Post* cartoon when he had Mr. Gingrich crawling out of the same sewer where he portrayed Richard Nixon years ago."

No fraying of the civic culture in such unexceptionable comments as *these*, it seems! No erosion of civility on the editorial pages of *The New York Times*! As with the "cynicism" of the voters, the negativity of the candidates is only alarming when it is coming from Republicans. Thus Miss Toner quoted Bill Carrick, consultant to the campaign of Senator Dianne Feinstein of California, as being particularly disgusted with the "mud bath" from which he had just emerged—as if he had been forced at gunpoint to climb into it in the first place. "The public's cynicism about politics and politicians," he told Robin Toner, "is such that whatever you assert positively about your candidate, it's almost impossible to get beyond the cynicism. The reaction is, 'Who can believe anything that a politician says about themselves?'"

What a naughty world we live in! Imagine the level of degradation to which a political culture has sunk when people don't believe what politicians say about themselves! But then why *should* we believe what politicians say about themselves? More to the point, why should we believe what political consultants say about themselves when they claim that the mud-wrestling in which they have just been lustily engaging is deeply distasteful to them? Such people sound like Mr. Raymond Carl Kinnamon, late of the penitentiary in Huntsville, Texas, who, as he was led off to be lethally injected last month for

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blowing off the back of another man's head in a bar in Houston, grumbled that capital punishment served no useful social purpose. What can you do with such shamelessness and humbug but laugh at it? But the press does not laugh and so the shamelessness and the humbug proliferate.

In other words, the problem with the American media is that it is not cynical enough. That is why that famously fraying political culture has for twenty years and upwards been built upon the disjunction of "feeling" and action. Under administrations of both parties, for example, politicians have been spending more money than they have dared to raise by means of taxes, borrowing the rest, and expecting to be excused for such profligate behavior on the ground that they feel just awful about it. Who is being cynical in this situation, the politicians or the voters who have finally figured out what frauds they are? Newt Gingrich, whatever may be his limitations, saw a way to restore respect for the political culture by giving voters in token of his sincerity a hostage—bound into the *TV Guide* and labeled: "If we break this contract, throw us out. We mean it."

As Hamlet said of the lady who protested too much: "If she should break it now!" What the press's exhaustive analysis missed was the introduction into the American political discourse, even in so small a measure as is represented by the "Contract with America," of the discipline of a parliamentary system. It may be that the vast majority of American voters did not know much about the Contract, but they did know something about the recent history of government accountability. And, as Gingrich told Howard Fineman of *Newsweek* on the morning after the election, "I may fail. We may fail. But this is real. I am who I seem to be." How long has it been since a politician on the national scene could get away with saying something like *that* with a straight face? I myself am a bit skeptical about the permanence of the Newtonian revolution, but then I am probably more cynical than the bulk of the patient, sweet-natured, rather intelligent, and very optimistic American electorate.

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Books

Intimations of mortality

by Brooke Allen

Writers and editors at *The New Yorker* vigorously deny that there is such thing as a *New Yorker* style. How can a magazine that publishes writers as different as Vladimir Nabokov and Eudora Welty, for example, be accused of having a house style? Such claims are of course disingenuous; everyone knows that there is a *New Yorker* style—even under the new regime—and everyone can recognize it when they come across it, though it's necessarily become somewhat broader since the days when Wolcott Gibbs advised the editors to raise the tone of the contributors' work, cutting out references to "Bohemian life in Greenwich Village and other low surroundings." The magazine's current writers may not live by such strictures, but the style, or rather the *mood*, of the stories holds true. As a character in a Benjamin Cheever novel puts it: "You know those clever pieces of fiction they run where nothing happens, but you feel a little sad about it anyway?"

John Updike, in one of his reviews, expressed it rather more poetically: "A short story, like the flare of a match, brings human faces out of darkness, and reveals depths beyond statistics." The match-flare metaphor is an apt one for the sort of fiction *The New Yorker* has traditionally published. It is fiction that within its self-imposed limitations can be enormously evocative and rich; in the hands of its best practitioners it achieves near-perfection. Because *The New Yorker* pays its writers so lavishly and gives them unequaled exposure, it has turned itself into the chief market in America for original short stories, and since virtually all young writers hope to be published by *The New Yorker*, they tend to tailor their style to the magazine's aesthetic. The result is that *New Yorker* editors like Harold Ross and William Shawn and *New Yorker* writers like Updike, John O'Hara, William Maxwell, and John Cheever have had an overpowering influence on younger writers; it's no exaggeration to say that the *New Yorker* style has turned out to be *the* style for the postwar American short story.

It is possible that the preponderance of any one mode, however excellent, is unhealthy for a genre. The *New Yorker* of the Shawn era, Updike allows, "was a club of sorts, from within which the large rest of literary America—the many other less distinguished and fastidious magazines, the coarsely striving book trade, the tawdry best-seller lists, the sharp-tongued quarterlies and partisan reviews—could be politely disdained." Shawn's war against topicality was waged with such passion that the magazine descended on occasion into egregious dullness and became only too visible a candidate for hostile takeover by a glitzier editorial team. But whatever *The New Yorker*'s lapses, it has for the last sixty years consistently published the best short fiction going.

Two of the magazine's best, longest-tenured, and most influential writers, John Updike and William Maxwell, have just

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published fiction collections.[1] Updike's stories are recent ones, written between 1986 and 1994, while Maxwell's date back to 1939, shortly after he began his forty-year career as a fiction editor at *The New Yorker*, but the two men, so clearly different in temperament, have nevertheless a tremendous amount in common. Writing in the later years of their lives (Maxwell is eighty-six, Updike sixty-two) and toward the end of a century that has seen a series of seismic changes, each writer is intensely concerned with mortality and the mutability of his world. If either collection can be said to have a protagonist, that protagonist is Time.

What is there about American small-town life that so many writers have found profoundly nurturing? What is there in these seemingly dull and convention-ridden backwaters that obsesses certain writers and provides them with apparently unlimited fictional material? Thurber's Columbus and Anderson's Camden, Ohio; Horton Foote's Wharton, Texas; Maxwell's Lincoln, Illinois; Updike's Shillington, Pennsylvania: They are unexciting places by most standards; only their native sons can perceive the high drama ever-burgeoning beneath their placid surfaces. American small-town life is vanishing rapidly, and many of us are familiar with it only at a remove, from anecdotes told us by our parents or grandparents. It is worth quoting Maxwell's best story, "The Value of Money," at some length to get an idea of the social contract that held such communities together. Here are the thoughts of that story's protagonist, a young New Yorker revisiting his native Draperville, Illinois, as he studies the patrons of the local hotel dining room:

> By virtue of having been born in this totally unremarkable place and of having lived out their lives here, they had something people elsewhere did not have. . . . This opinion every person in the room agreed with, he knew, and no doubt it had been put into his mind when he was a child. For it was something that he never failed to be struck by—those sweeping statements in praise of Draperville that were almost an article of religious faith. They spoke about each other in much the same way. "There isn't a finer man anywhere on this earth," they would say, in a tone of absolute conviction, sometimes about somebody who was indeed admirable, but just as often it would be some local skinflint, some banker or lawyer who made a specialty of robbing widows and orphans and was just barely a member of the human race. A moment later, opposed to this falsehood and in fact utterly contradicting it, there was a more realistic appraisal, which to his surprise they did not hesitate to express. But it would be wrong to say that the second statement represented their true opinion; it was just their other one.

Maxwell has made his native town the principal setting for his fiction; Updike has swerved out into the relatively fast lanes of the New England suburbs. But both writers remain rooted in their origins: Updike refers to his "Shillington self" as his "most fruitful self," and writes that he becomes "exhilarated in Shillington, as if my self is being given a bath in its own essence." Having grown up before and during World War II, Updike is aware that his was the last generation to experience the pure, self-sufficient life of small-town America, before the fatal intrusions of television, highways, and air travel. Both Maxwell and Updike give a consciously Edenic quality to their native towns. Their insistent mythologization of their own childhoods may seem to testify to an excess of self-consciousness, but we are all prone to such mythologizing; Updike in fact called his 1989 memoir, provocatively, *Self-Consciousness*, and argued in it that "a writer's self-consciousness, for which he is much scorned, is really a mode of interestedness, that inevitably turns outward."

Perhaps what makes these small, unexciting communities so attractive to writers is simply the fact that their fixed social struc-

1 *The Afterlife and Other Stories*, by John Updike; Knopf, 316 pages, $24. *All the Days and Nights: The Collected Stories of William Maxwell*; Knopf, 415 pages, $25.

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tures and limited casts of characters are ideal for framing narratives. To know several generations of a family, however superficially, is to be given the narrative satisfaction of seeing how a story turns out.

Taken together, the twenty-one stories in Updike's *The Afterlife* paint the portrait of a single man, in effect an *Ur*-hero with a close resemblance to Updike himself. This composite character is a much-loved only child who spent his idyllic childhood in a small Pennsylvania town. When he reached adolescence his mother bought a farm and the boy was forced to leave his happy town existence and begin a life of relative isolation and discomfort from which he longed to escape. Escape he did: first to Harvard, later to a plush suburban life. Now in his fifties or sixties, he has been married twice or even three times—in almost all of these stories, the ex-wife lurks darkly, a mythological figure, the unseen but acknowledged third presence in every marital configuration. Vivian Allenson, for example, in "George and Vivian," always knows when her husband is thinking about one of his ex-wives. "Your face when we started out had its Jeaneanne look. Which is different from its Claire look. Your Claire look is sort of woebegone. Your Jeaneanne look is fierce."

In the five stories in *The Afterlife* which deal with small-town and rural Pennsylvania, Updike eschews childhood reminiscences in favor of revisitations. The situation in each of these stories is more or less the same: that of a man in late middle age returning to a childhood home and bearing witness to the "hurricane of time" that has laid it waste. The best and most ambitious of the group is "A Sandstone Farmhouse," a sequel to Updike's 1965 novel, *Of the Farm*. In a series of short scenes we see Joey Robinson, now well into his fifties, as he pays a series of visits to his mother's dilapidated farmhouse. He watches his mother become increasingly feeble and, after her death, he returns to the farm to empty it, to reduce "the house to its essence, removing every trace, even a rusty pencil sharpener screwed to a windowsill, of his life and the four lives that had ended." Joey's feelings about the farm, as about his mother, are complex; he has always associated the farmhouse with his own restlessness, his wish to "be where the action was." His mother, on the other hand, "loved the old house; she loved the *idea* of it." The house and the mother merge and diverge in Joey's consciousness, and the character of the mother, determined, angry, protective, and humorless, materializes for the reader through Joey's fragmented memories. His mother's death is not a resolution for Joey but an occasion for new doubts: doubts about himself ("His first marriage took place in three different apartments, his turbulent second in four, his short-lived third in only one, and now he wondered if women had been not quite his thing all along") and about his direction in life; perhaps "the action" had been on the farm all along.

Another fine story is "The Other Side of the Street," in which Rentschler, a man of about sixty, revisits his home town to clear up affairs after his mother's death. He goes to a notary public who happens to live across the street from his childhood home: "it excited him to be on this side of the street, the other side, looking through this woman's windows at his old house." He marvels not only at the changes that have come about but at the things that have not changed, and at what he sees as the "majestically rooted life" of his childhood playmate, Wilma Anna, who has never left the neighborhood, and he "inhaled Hayesville happiness; he saw his entire life, past and to come, as an errant encircling of this forgotten center." As he leaves the notary's house and steps out into the street, he looks across and is "dazzled to see the house on the other side of the street ablaze; the porch light and front-room lamps were lit up as if to welcome a visitor, a visitor, it seemed clear to him, long expected and much beloved."

Over a lifetime's writing, however, Updike has made his major subject not nostalgia but marriage, or rather the erotic urges that give the male animal a *desire* for marriage, in effect an urge toward ownership.

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The protagonist of "Wildlife," Ferris, muses on "that romantic wish so common to men of Ferris's generation, the wish to marry—to claim in the sight of church and state this female body, to enter into formalized intimacy as if into a territory to be conquered, tamed, sown and harvested." (If Ferris were a trendier type he might have trotted out the word "colonized.") Updike's men have aged, and for them the once-vital element of romance has become ever more questionable as its blatant failures mount up. Each woman before being legally claimed seemed to hold a promise of immortality—eternal youth or divinity. Once possessed, she turns out after all to be nothing but a Wife, always a symbol of mortality in Updike. Most of his elderly protagonists have resigned themselves to a flawed existence with their more or less unsatisfactory spouses; they search for intimations of immortality, if they do so at all, elsewhere.

But they are awkward in the search, being wholly unaccustomed to it. In the title story, even Carter Billings's flippant, passing reference to the Maker as the "Big Guy" is considered an "outburst of theology" so "unexpected that the three others stared at him with a silence in which the chimneys could be heard to moan and the breakfast china to click." Carter, who feels the beginnings of old age pressing upon him, is slipping away from his companions, losing interest in everyday things. "There were, it had recently come to him, vast areas of the world he no longer cared about—Henry James, for example, and professional ice hockey, and nuclear disarmament. He did not doubt that within these areas much excitement could be generated, but not for him, nevermore." He is beginning to realize that he will, in the not-too-distant future, die.

Two of the best stories in the collection deal with characters who have in some sense given up on life, who clearly will never achieve even Carter Billings's tantalizing brushes with the divine. "Short Easter" paints a heartbreaking picture of the sort of bleak curmudgeon many men turn into. Fogel, at sixty-two, is full of displaced rage. "The line at the post office was held up by people buying money orders, and the line at the grocery store by people buying state lottery tickets. It seemed to him sheer willful obstructionism." "Almost every other automobile on the road—those that passed him, those so slow he had to pass them, those going just his speed and hanging in his side mirrors like pursuing furies—seemed a deliberate affront, restricting his freedom and being somehow *pretentious* about it." Fogel is haunted by the pointlessness of his life, and as we observe his uneventful Easter Sunday, during which he reads the newspaper, does yard work with his wife, goes to a routine Sunday brunch, and watches a golf tournament on television, we share his obscure but powerful sense of bereavement. Another excellent story, "George and Vivian," perfectly captures the claustrophobia of a holidaying couple. Cooped up together in tiny rented cars as they drive through Italy and Ireland, George and Vivian together act out the archetypal incompatibility of male and female.

To many people, particularly women, Updike's composite hero has been and will continue to be repugnant. But this is beside the point; while Updike is a practicing Christian, he is in the business of conveying not life's moments of transcendence but the virtual impossibility of achieving such moments. That his fictional alter-egos are ruthless and selfish, their essentially cold natures only infrequently thawed by hope, love, or empathy, is simply the result of Updike's lifelong attempt to record reality as he sees it.

If heaven for Updike is a tantalizingly distant and indistinct vision, for William Maxwell it is here and now. Marriage does not constitute a presage of death, it is life-giving: children are not usurpers, objects of suspicion, but much loved and feared for. Maxwell, thoroughly American, is an heir of Emerson; the hero of his title story, "All the Days and Nights," means to "live each day to the full . . . and still not let go of it."

In his preface to this collection (which has

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largely been culled from his previous collections, *Over by the River*, *Billie Dyer*, and *The Old Man at the Railroad Crossing*), Maxwell states that, by the time he was twenty-five, three-quarters of the material he would need as a writer was already at his disposal: "My father and mother. My brothers. The cast of larger-than-life-size characters . . . that I was presented with when I came into the world." But Maxwell is wrong to classify such characters as "larger-than-life-size"; they are exactly life-size, and it is that which makes them fit their surroundings so precisely. Small-town eccentricity has been a sadly overworked theme in American writing, and by keeping his characters on a human scale Maxwell has made them living beings who never approach the grotesque. Marvelous examples are the young wife in "The Trojan Women," who sees herself as a tragic heroine and keeps leaving her husband for no discernible reason except that he won't let her go to Peoria, and the hoarding old lady in "A Final Report," who is "sufficiently aware of all that she had lost, and did not want to add to it by throwing things away—even such things as the evening paper and the second-class mail."

Maxwell sees the family as an organic unit, each member thinking and acting not in isolation but in reaction to the other members of the clan. There is, in "A Game of Chess," the middle-aged Illinois businessman trying to impress and irk his younger brother, who has moved on to a precarious but exciting life as an artist in New York:

> "I'm a big duck in a little pond; you're a little duck in a big pond," Amos said serenely. "Ellen knows a woman who studied at the Art Institute. She knows a lot about art. I mentioned that I had a brother who is a painter, and drew a blank. . . . You've got to keep your name before the public, Hugh."

Amos also gets at Hugh by goading his young wife. "You must come out to Chicago," he tells her. "We've got a housing project with niggers and white people living together." Laura knows enough to ignore the remark, clearly "intended to beat Laura out of the bushes and perhaps test the timbre of her rising voice."

Then, in "The Value of Money," there is the brilliantly depicted relationship between a youngish man—another New Yorker—and his small-town father, a confident self-made man, somewhat narrow-minded, infuriating but wholly dependable. Edward is nervous with his father: his voice in speaking to him "was gentle but careful, as if he were piloting a riverboat upstream with due regard for submerged sandbars and dangerous snags under the smoothly flowing surface of the water." The dynamic of the relationship is brought into sharp outline when the two finally have an argument: "Edward regarded it as a personal failure in steering the riverboat upstream, whereas Mr. Ferrers five minutes later had dismissed the incident from his mind."

Though Maxwell's principal subject is his Illinois youth, his second is the turf on which he has spent his adult life, New York's Upper East Side, a place he evokes with great authority. "Over by the River" is a disturbing story about the day-to-day doings of a well-to-do family in the East 80s: George Carrington goes to his office; the two little girls go to and from their private school; Iris efficiently deals with Saks, the pediatrician, the upholsterer, the children's school, the Maid-to-Order service. Nothing much happens to the Carringtons, but a distinct sense of menace hovers over their safe world, and from the slight distance Maxwell imposes between reader and subjects we see how very vulnerable the cozy family unit really is. George is peripherally conscious of the gap between the upper-class New Yorker's carefully constructed environment and the threatening forces which press at its fringes. He has doubts about his life, which he confides to a sympathetic woman he meets at a cocktail party:

> "People you have known for twenty or thirty years, you suddenly discover you didn't really know how they felt about you, and in fact you don't know how anybody feels about any-

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thing—only what they *say* they feel. And suppose that isn't true at all? You decide that it is better to act as if it is true. And so does everybody else. But it is a kind of myth you are living in, wide awake, with your eyes open, in broad daylight."

Our personal worlds are built of what we decide to reveal to others and what we decide to believe that others are really like: this point is made again in "What He Was Like," in which a dead man's diary reveals to his daughter an entirely different, and much darker, person from the father she had loved. In the few moments it takes her to realize this, the fragile network of her assumptions is destroyed, and she is reluctant to be separated from her husband "even for the length of time it would take him to go out to the kitchen and come back with a margarita suspended from the fingers of each hand, lest in that brief interval he turn into a stranger." Another oddly haunting story is "The Thistles in Sweden": a childless husband and wife cloak their sadness in an aesthetic perfectionism, tending their apartment and cat with all the love they long to lavish on a baby.

Not all of Maxwell's stories are realistic in style. At the end of the collection he has placed twenty-one "improvisations," short, often supernatural fables with a moral or message for modern readers. This sort of thing usually tends to be all too adorable, but Maxwell, an eminently unpretentious artist, pulls it off; the improvisations are as readable, often as moving, as the rest of the stories. Another imaginative leap he has taken—at some risk to his reputation in today's hyper-sensitive racial climate—is to write several stories with black protagonists. Ever since William Styron ran into so much trouble with black critics after the publication of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* it has been a dangerous business for white writers to put thoughts into the heads of black characters. Maxwell handles the problem by not actually guessing these thoughts: instead he takes a humble position, that of the outsider, curious about the black people who were such an important part of his early life yet baffled by their successful strategies for keeping their thoughts to themselves.

Perhaps Maxwell's most refreshing, and most valuable, asset is the fact that he is unafraid of either simplicity or sentiment. In this he differs from his contemporaries, for when the modern movement came along it virtually killed sentimentality in serious literature. For these qualities above all others Maxwell should be considered extraordinary; it takes rare confidence and broad-mindedness to keep it simple when one has all the resources of subtlety and sophistication at one's disposal.

In Darwin's footsteps

Edward O. Wilson Naturalist.
Island Press/Shearwater Books,
380 pages, $24.95

reviewed by Paul R. Gross

In natural science . . . there is nothing petty to the mind that has a large vision of relations, and to which every single object suggests a vast sum of conditions.
—George Eliot

My admirable teacher, L. V. Heilbrunn, liked maxims. Never at a loss in exegesis (he wrote the definitive textbook of General Physiology), L.V.H. nevertheless relied, in ventilating research strategy, upon aphorisms. Badgered by students for expensive instruments, he would say: "When the equipment gets bigger than your arm-span, you're a biophysicist" (a derogation). Or, when a collaborator grew restless under library work, or endless repetitions of an experiment, Heilbrunn would declare: "You can't discover new biology until you've learned the old." This he would then expand as: "No organism is insignificant: master it *completely*, and you will make discoveries."

He did not follow his own advice. He was delighted, for example, with my ten-foot makeshift for studying the kinetics of he-

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molysis. He could be contemptuous of scholarly single-mindedness other than his own—of a colleague, for example, who had for decades been at the microscope scanning salivary-gland chromosomes. For field biologists he often had disdain: he called these naturalists "Linnaeans."

Some of his advice was sound; his own failure to follow it was fatal. He did make discoveries; he defined the central and universal role of calcium ions in cellular excitation. But he was unwilling to learn much of, let alone *completely*, the existing, and relevant, chemistry of proteins and ions. He continued to use the abandoned word *protoplasm* ("the living substance")—archetype of naming substituted for knowing—until his unseasonable death. Recognition he had earned and desired never came. A new domain of scientific knowledge, rightfully his, was claimed by others.

I begin with that sad story because it is the perfect antithesis to E. O. Wilson's immensely and deservedly happier one. A "Linnaean" all his life, Wilson has never ceased to identify, sort, classify living things, never rested from the attempt to absorb as much of the biospheric spectacle as possible, to absorb everything known about particular aspects of it, be they as bounded as knowing everything about ants or as vague and quixotic as bridging, single-handedly, the natural and the human sciences. He has never lost his "biophilia"; and he has become the foremost advocate of biodiversity.

Wilson was able early in his career to rally to his cause intelligences among the then-declining ranks of naturalists, to encourage and recruit the mathematically gifted and genetically sophisticated to a new company. Thus he oversaw the emergence of a "population biology" that would become the theoretical core of ecology. He extracted some of the universals of animal societies, and applied them boldly (and dangerously) to human behavior—which was from the beginning *social* behavior. In short, a teacher, a synthesizer, a fount of ideas no significant subset of which he could follow up at any one time; and withal, a writer of books and flawless technical reports, able to inspire belief, or at least the determined testing of his ideas.

To have autobiography from so prolific a scientist while he remains at work is for that reason alone a treat. This accounts for the early interest in this book and makes it *ipso facto* important. But it is important *not* simply because of Wilson's celebrity (among the interleaved photographs are images of the author shaking hands with the King of Sweden, receiving honors from Prince Philip, being presented the National Medal of Science by a grinning Jimmy Carter). It is important not because, as is often the case with tales told by or of famous men, it reveals the principal as a gifted cad, a Picasso or a Brecht, fascinating and repulsive. Wilson is *their* antithesis, too.

Naturalist is important because it is, first, an account of beautiful science done in the twentieth century, of how and why it was done; and, quite secondarily, of the decent and not-so-decent people who do it for a living. It might be a start toward balancing the now-copious output of science criticism in which the cognitive—*the essential*—content is slighted in favor of political theorizing.

Today's historians and sociologists of science don't write books like this. The younger and more correct among them may sneer at it as Whiggish. Only a few scientists have the literary discipline to write so. Serious philosophers of science (there are non-serious ones) tend to be deductivists at heart even if they try not to be; the twentieth-century unification of natural history, systematics, evolutionary biology, population genetics, and behavioral biology, in which Wilson has played a large part, is an inductivist enterprise. Post-positivists and relativists seem not to have heard of it. Those few scientists who are lucky and become famous tend, like other savants, to stick to their lasts—to the bitter end. Writing stories is not what made them famous. *Naturalist* is a summing-up of Wilson's life within the science to which it has been dedi-

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cated, in an extraordinarily fruitful period for biology. The story is of an engagement that is nowhere near an end. If Wilson is his own protagonist, then the new evolutionary biology shares that status.

The cover photograph is of the man we know, admired friend of presidents and emperors, middle-aged and trim, scholarly-looking, his brow decorated by an untamable forelock, examining with his one good eye, through a magnifying glass—an ant. Of course: he made himself, by ceaseless work, the world's greatest ant-man. For that alone, however, he would have attained to professorship only in a lesser place than Harvard, to a curatorship, perhaps, in one of the more respectable museums. No; the photograph that tells Wilson's story follows page 112, the one taken in 1944, in Brewton, Alabama—one of his sadly many home towns in the Old South. It must have been made soon after this serious-looking boy was promoted to Eagle Scout. A fine image: the hair neatly combed, a clean, probably new uniform, neckerchief, troop insignia—all those merit badges! There is no hint of pride or foolishness in this boy's face, but there is determination, and—remarkably—peace.

Peace and the merit badges are giveaways. They fly in the face of psychobabble on ineluctable failure if upbringing is less than 100 percent secure. This boy's upbringing was anything but secure. Son of divorced parents, brought up amidst financial hardship, for a time by a father alone who drank too much and failed in all his endeavors, later by father and stepmother in homes moved abruptly from one Southern town to another, sent away to military school, avoiding some but not all fist-fights, he managed nevertheless to indulge his passions—zoology; collecting, classifying, the abounding life of field, forest, and stream:

> So inevitably, and given that I was looking at the world with only one visually acute eye, I came to be an entomologist, a scientist who specializes in insects. To put the matter as simply as possible: most children have a bug period, and I never grew out of mine.

Wilson was steeled by the modest virtues that are also the official undertakings of scouting: honesty, cleanliness, hard work, courage. Among the most touching passages, in a book with many such, are Wilson's statements, generous like his words even about enemies, on his father:

> In early 1951 my father grew noticeably depressed and his behavior erratic. I was not able to read the signs . . . Early in the morning of March 26, he wrote a calm note of apology to his family, drove his car to an empty section of Bloodgood Street near the Mobile River, seated himself by the side of the road, put his favorite target pistol to his right temple, and ended his pain. He was forty-eight years old when he died. . . .
>
> No son knows his father well enough to matter until it is too late; then understanding comes in fragments. I can say of him that he was an intelligent man who cheated himself of his own potential.

A scout's virtues, so easily derided, were the qualities that overcame difficulties that would have thwarted a boy less fortunate in the values shaping his character. They allowed him a full, happy, and productive childhood. They did not erase self-doubt; nor did they in any way inhibit what Wilson calls the "amphetamine of ambition," without which there would not have been the astonishing labors that brought him early a chair in a great university and, later, honors piled upon honors. To those who know him, he remains a scout.

Systematics—the naming, analysis of relationships among, and, much later, the evolutionary histories of plants and animals—an activity of ancient and decidedly unsystematic origins, came via Linnaeus in the eighteenth century to naturalists of the nineteenth and ours. In the early decades of this one, a naturalist's work was primarily in the field, only secondarily indoors. A natur-

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alist specialized in a particular category of plants or animals, or aimed at an encyclopedic grasp of the biota of a particular place. Either way, the naturalist took the world as laboratory. As a young entomologist, Wilson was to be found, whenever it was possible for him to go, in forests, jungles, and wild places of the Americas and the South Pacific, on islands and in the depths of continents. This is the legacy of the great nineteenth-century expeditions. No literate young naturalist fails, to this day, to dream the cramped cabin of H.M.S. *Beagle*, shared by Darwin and FitzRoy, with Darwin's proliferating specimen-collection and notebooks crowding out FitzRoy's chronometers.

But a different kind of life science was replacing such biology even before the nineteenth century closed. The triumphs of physics and chemistry, soon thereafter of physiological chemistry, inspired a search for explanations of life, not in the historical relationships of organisms but in physics and chemistry that might distinguish life from non-life, in the atomistic processes by which cells and organisms accomplish what seemed (but is not) a thermodynamic impossibility —the creation of living order from disorder.

Those accomplishments had been taken for granted, attributed still to deity or to unknowable vital forces, during the ascendancy, following Darwin, of "evolutionary morphology." But the rediscovery of Mendel's laws at the dawn of the new century, the identification of chromosomes as carriers of "genes," the explosive advance of genetics in the succeeding twenty years, led to a shift of interests among enterprising investigators. By the late 1930s, a chemistry of life was established; dispersal to England and America of refugee-biochemists, following the Nazi takeover, strengthened the life sciences of both countries: biochemistry became a core language of biology and catalyst of a sharply upward trajectory of scientific medicine.

After World War II the streams of genetics and biochemistry became confluent, fed later by such others as cell biology and neurophysiology, those in turn capitalizing upon wartime advances in electronics and imaging. The combined flow became a torrent. With it came the biological theory-of-everything soon named molecular biology, its consequent discoveries ramifying through all the sciences. DNA entered the vernacular as the naturalist's "analogy" and "homology" had never done. In upwardly-mobile departments of biology and medical schools, the molecular level became the level of interest. Prominent naturalists grew old. Younger ones clustered for protection in less-than-stellar departments of less-than-opulent universities and state colleges.

There were honorable exceptions. Naturalists, or at least "evolutionary biologists," retained power—and students—in a few top institutions, Harvard, to its credit, among them. It was to this Harvard and its resident notables in natural history that Wilson, the bug-loving scout from Alabama, came after preliminary graduate and professional work in entomology at the University of Alabama. He arrived at a time when, despite those notables, the shift of prestige from descriptive and speculative natural history to molecular biology was in full career. To many new biologists, natural history was a harmless anachronism, intellectually unchallenging. Wilson is not loath to name here some very famous examples of this snobbery, or to discuss them, albeit in a generous spirit.

The irresistible flood brought with it, as floods do, destruction and fragmentation; only later were the newly-fertile fields to reappear. At the start of the century there had been separate departments of botany and zoology, sometimes also of entomology, mammalogy; the postwar unification converted most of them to departments simply of biology. Their common languages were biochemistry, genetics, and—with inexorable advances in microscopy—a "cell biology" incorporating cytology, cytogenetics, and general physiology. The results are with us; and grateful we should be for it! Leave aside the intellectual prizes, the clear answers to questions—Preformation or Epigenesis? —that troubled thinkers since Aristotle.

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Consider only the practical benefits, the life-span increase, the disasters for human and animal life on this planet reduced or averted by its products.

Harvard Biology too was, literally, fragmented. For a time it could be said that the naturalists had lost. That can no longer be said, about Harvard or any other university with a claim to comprehensiveness. The amalgam of disciplines hammered out of natural history, bio-geography, and systematics, conjoined with an ecology advanced beyond the imagining of the Romantic Ernst Haeckel, who invented the name on the stem *oikos* (Gr., "house"), rose, phoenix-like, from the ashes. It did so illustrating one of Wilson's own discoveries: the rise to dominance of those species adapted to reproduction in marginal environments. It did so because it became clear, even to skeptics, that natural history remains indispensable to the explanation of life on earth.

Wilson's projects and books trace that rise and were important to it, although the contributors were soon no small band of visionaries but a company, assimilating to itself old and new knowledge, recruits young and obscure and old and famous. His bibliography is a record of the transformation: *The Theory of Island Biogeography* (1967, with the brilliant and tragically short-lived Robert MacArthur); *A Primer of Population Biology* (1971, with William H. Bossert); *The Insect Societies* (1971); the successful introductory textbook *Life On Earth* (1975, with distinguished co-authors); *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (1975, of which more below).

It is fashionable to describe such intellectual movements as "paradigm shifts," "revolutions," referring to Thomas S. Kuhn's seminal (1962) account of theory-change in physics. This is an important error. Later theorists (not Kuhn himself) have taken his account as empirical support for social constructivism and epistemological relativism. Wilson himself misuses the term. He describes as "what historians of science call a paradigm shift" the changes forced upon his thought by the 1964 publication of William Hamilton's luminous theory of kin selection, a theory that convinced Wilson, in fact, of the possibility of a *socio*biology.

Kuhn's model, proposed for all science, does not apply. It is not true here, as the model requires, that the new and the old, the molecular and the organismal, were "incommensurable." It is not true that significant old knowledge was lost or abandoned. It is not true that old men stuck doggedly to the old theories while the young took to the new like ducks to water. It is not true that social and personal factors weighed heavily in the making and acceptance of new natural history, responding to socio-cultural imperatives. *Naturalist* is therefore important, above all, because this first-hand account of scientific theory demonstrates that the stimuli were, as they have been in serious science for three hundred years, the internal ideas, the inexorable logic, the constraint of experiment and observation; the way things are. Even naturalists need experiments: Wilson and Simberloff had to sterilize an island and watch its repopulation before they could be confident of a theory!

And so to the single ugly part of the story, unique only in the eminence of the victim. *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* was a truly Wilsonian undertaking, *hubris* for any lesser workaholic. But it was no longer a lonely one. Aided by talented collaborators and the publications of colleagues around the world, Wilson plunged into a comprehensive treatment of social behavior in animals. One chapter—the twenty-sixth and last—dealt with prospects for a *human* social biology, a continuity, as it were, of all products of organic evolution. One marvels at his naïveté in politics and academic territoriality. He does so, now, himself.

> Perhaps I should have stopped at chimpanzees when I wrote the book. Many biologists wish I had. Even several of the critics said that *Sociobiology* would have been a great book if I had not added the final chapter, the one on human beings.

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Wilson had touched a raw nerve of the intelligentsia, of which he, Eagle Scout, was unaware. "Biological determinism" is, to some social scientists and all ideologues of the Left, blasphemy. It has been so since Karl Marx argued vaguely, in 1859, that it is not man's consciousness that makes society, but society that makes consciousness. That heredity has *anything* to do with human behavior is anathema: it is taken to imply *either* that the oppressed are so because by nature deficient, or that the fortunate are so because of natural selection for good qualities. Either way, the idea seems to deny perfectibility of the social order through politics, and to deny that power for the exploited will redeem social life. This was, moreover, the 1970s: the notion that human evolution has included a division of labor between the sexes that must have conferred selective advantage violates the anti-essentialism of official feminist thought. There could be no biological element of "gender"; no important biological differences between the sexes. Wilson, somehow, failed, in the delight of his work, to see how terrible a challenge that last chapter would be.

And so secret meetings were held, some in the building that housed him. Petitions were circulated. Wilson was denounced as reactionary, racist, sexist. His name was besmirched by whispering that reached the West Coast and Europe. His classroom was invaded; he was denounced by bullhorn in Harvard Square. At a symposium in Washington, he was shouted down, doused with ice-water. It became necessary, for the safety of his family, to consider leaving Harvard for some less-political venue.

Wilson survived these indignities with his work, his generosity, and his reputation intact. Colleagues, true to form, had been unhelpful in the long interval of trouble. Professors are Confucians by adherence to the dictum "Shun the Unfortunate," unless speaking up carries no risk. The fuss died down, although the ideological furies did not: their descendants are forms of political correctness now so entrenched in universities that we no longer notice them. Ironically, the campaign against species impoverishment, of which Wilson is now the world's leading spokesman, is one of those forms.

The closing chapter of *Sociobiology* has been vindicated. Ideological anti-hereditarians now take the high ground, insisting that they mean only to show that the effect of genes on human behavior—that is, all of development and neurophysiology—is importantly alterable by environment. A senior editor of *The New Republic* has published *The Moral Animal*, a valuable popular account of evolutionary psychology. That discipline, in its current configuration, was predicted by the sociobiology of twenty-five years ago. Wilson's books, such as the splendid *On Human Nature* (1978), expanding the thesis of that last chapter, have received the highest honors books can get. Sociobiology thrives. The issues of biodiversity are more and more seriously examined.

How fortunate E. O. Wilson has been to win recognition so well-deserved! (How rare that is!) But more: how fortunate we are to have him among us, adding to the records of natural science this story that is, in the end, not his alone, but ours.

Castroenteritis

Guillermo Cabrera Infante Mea Cuba.
Translated from the Spanish
by Kenneth Hall with the author.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 503 pages, $23

reviewed by Mark Falcoff

Guillermo Cabrera Infante is a Cuban novelist of some distinction (*Three Trapped Tigers*, *Holy Smoke*, *Infante's Inferno*) who has managed somehow to avoid the kind of celebrity perennially lavished on other Latin American writers of far lesser stature. Perhaps part of the reason lies in the fact that he lives and works in London, a city tone-deaf to Spanish language and culture. Or that he writes about a country (Cuba of the Forties and Fifties) which has ceased to exist. Or that his style is too complex and difficult for

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the average reader. But one cannot by any means discard the possibility that his politics have something to do with it. Having fled Castro's revolution, he is automatically prohibited from claiming the kind of exalted victim-status which has served other Latin con men (and con women) so well in New York, San Francisco, Cambridge, Durham, and Ann Arbor.

Worse still, far from suffering in silence, Cabrera Infante has ever been an active polemicist, taking on Fidel Castro's admirers on the soft-left in such inhospitable forums as *The London Review of Books*, Madrid's Falangist *Indice* and its worthy Socialist successor *El País*, *Die Zeit*, and *Salmagundi*. A dangerous business, this: an exiled Cuban writer who doesn't know his "place." More dangerous still, he knows where all the bodies are buried and blurts out innumerable family secrets. This book—a pastiche of memoirs, letters to the editor, speeches, articles, and lectures—is full of them.

Cabrera Infante writes about Cuban Communism with a special kind of authority. Both parents were founders of the old Cuban Communist Party; in their living room pictures of Stalin and Christ hung side-by-side. By sheer osmosis he received an early political education of the most valuable kind. As he says, he grew up "among the contradictions not of capitalism but of Communism," watching his parents perform some death-defying ideological gymnastics. These included supporting Cuban strongman Fulgencio Batista for the presidency in 1940 after both had spent time as his guest in various prisons, and switching from militant neutrality in the "imperialist" war of 1939–41 to rabid pro-Soviet interventionism in 1941–45.

Cabrera Infante reminds us that in 1940s Cuba, the Communist Party was something more than just a political organization; it was a major pole of cultural attraction. For people in the literary and cultural communities, it provided important publishing outlets, international connections, and opportunities for foreign travel. Thus from a very early age, Cabrera was on familiar terms with important Cuban writers in and around the Party like Nicolás Guillén and Alejo Carpentier, as well as lesser lights whom he has rescued here from oblivion.

That leftish cultural word was not without interest, since it combined—in a rather contradictory way—Surrealism and Trotskyism, "mixed," he adds, "with bad metaphors—or heady drinks." As late as 1960, when the fusion of the Party and Fidel Castro's victorious 26th of July Movement was not quite complete, these anomalous trends could coexist in the cultural supplement to the newspaper *Revolución*, where Cabrera served as editor. Very quickly, however, the libertarian strain of the Cuban revolution was submerged in a sea of *Kulturstalinismus*. "Too late," Cabrera writes, "I discovered that . . . we hit what seemed a mere sectarian wave but was the tip of the totalitarian iceberg." As a consolation prize he was offered the position of cultural attaché in Belgium, a position from which he resigned in 1965. He has lived in Europe ever since.

In the cartoon-strip which passes for the history of pre-Castro Cuba in the United States, Western Europe, and Latin America, three points are always emphasized. One, that Cuba was nothing but the "bordello of the United States." Two, that racism there was pervasive, with the strong implication that it has since been abolished. Three, that the country was without schools, hospitals, or social welfare institutions. As one refugee professor inquired of Cabrera at the home of a Hollywood film producer: "But isn't it true zat unter Doktor Castro de island has made great progress in health and education?" To which Cabrera replied, "Even if the education program was a success, which it wasn't, what good is teaching millions of people to read when only one man decides what you read?"

The real issue, of course, is the distortion of Cuba's past. As Cabrera tells it, when filmmaker and critic Nestor Almendros arrived in Cuba in 1939 as a Republican refugee from Spain—from Barcelona, no less!—he was amazed at the number of

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cinemas, as well as the profusion of magazines dedicated to the seventh art. He could easily have added that at the time Havana had more bookshops than any other city in the Spanish-speaking world, and was home as well to numerous legitimate theaters, cultural forums, music societies, and other expressions of high culture.

> It is true [Cabrera Infante writes] that there were more houses of ill-repute than publishing houses in Havana before the Revolution . . . But you can say the same of New York now, where, on a stroll down Broadway, you'll be able to meet more whores than writers and see more pimps than literary agents—no equation intended.

To Graham Greene's remark that "Cuba is a country now, and not merely a pleasure-capital as it was in Batista's day," Cabrera Infante has this to say:

> Apart from not disclosing how less discerning men than he can tell when a country is not a country (what divining rod did Greene use—Aaron's rod?) he chides Cuba (he probably meant only Havana) for being a mere pleasure capital . . . I wish it had been just that then! I *lived* there and I saw suffering enough to make not a phrase but to fill a volume. . . .
>
> And what is wrong [he adds] with being a pleasure capital? . . . For Greene's baize information, today there are more casinos and gaming clubs in London than there ever were in Cuba before 1959—and that doesn't make London a pleasure palace.

He is equally piquant on the subject of race relations. (It is perhaps worth mentioning in passing here that, far from being a "white" Cuban, Cabrera Infante is of partly Chinese origin, and noticeably so.) He reminds us that the most famous mulatto in Cuban history was Fulgencio Batista himself, as was the chief of his army and several prominent pre-Castro generals and politicians. "The composition of [Batista's] troops was about 75 percent blacks and mulattoes. His last mercenary levy to complete a professional army, realized in 1958, cast a percentage of ninety black soldiers for each one hundred troops."

Moreover, when it was time for Batista to choose his successor at the end of his first presidency (1940–44), he turned to "an eminent member of the *criollo* upper bourgeoisie. Even more curious, [in this] he was supported as well by the Communists and their black leader." The lines between white and black, as between Left and Right, were never as neatly defined in Cuban politics and sociology as recent visitors to the island seem to require. Nor was blackness itself regarded as a particularly valuable totem by prominent Afro-Cubans themselves. Cabrera recalls a meeting in Havana in 1961 at which he introduced Nicolás Guillén to an American woman, a publisher from New York. "Ah, the great black poet!" she exclaimed. She was immediately brought up short by Guillén: "Not black, mulatto." Cabrera adds: "The American lady stood corrected, rooted to the spot."

This anecdote is merely one of many that tear the mask from some of the legendary figures of the Cuban revolution. Here, for example, is Haydée Santamaría, one of the original women militants in Castro's 26th of July Movement, later head of the Casa de las Américas publishing house, fresh from her first visit to the USSR: "There was not a single artist in jail [there]," she explained. "Never! No creator was ever put in prison. But not one! Comrade Furtseva explained to me that the abstract artists and the decadent bourgeois writers who were imprisoned, were put there for being agents of Nazism." (Recited, one hopes, with a straight face.) Or here she is again: "I always thought that Marx and Engels were a single philosopher. You know, like Ortega y Gasset." (For many years la Santamaría was married to Culture Minister Armando Hart, "a man," Cabrera writes, "with whom she could reach a perfect understanding across the abyss of their respective ignorances.")

The martyred Che Guevara "had read more books than Fidel and Raúl [Castro]

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put together—which was not an exploit." Nonetheless, in an unguarded moment, he—Che—described his relationship with the Cuban dictator as something akin to a failed marriage you cannot dissolve—what Cabrera calls "a marriage of inconvenience." Then there is Raúl's hateful wife, Vilma Espín, "a Vassar girl who came from an incredibly wealthy family related to Bacardi, the rum makers." In their apartment there were no books at all; "Raúl's only claim to fame was that he could take apart a Walther pistol and put it back together in record time—blindfolded."

Or here is the richest jest of all. At the Cuban Embassy in Paris a young and attractive receptionist was suddenly replaced by a Spanish hag, a "dry and disagreeable old woman." Eventually Cabrera discovered that she was Caridad Mercader, the mother of Trotsky's murderer, Stalinist agent Ramón Mercader (who ended his days in Cuba after release from prison in Mexico). Most German Trotskyists collecting visas for travel to Cuba would go to Paris, and unbeknownst to them, the door would be opened—both literally and figuratively—by the intellectual author of their idol's assassination!

In a particularly revealing essay Cabrera Infante reminds us of the number of major Cuban figures who have died by their own hand. The most famous of all these was, of course, Eddy Chibás, a radio commentator who had overreached himself in his accusations against a Cuban minister of education in the early 1950s, and felt obliged to end it all with a Magnum pistol a few seconds after his Sunday-evening radio program went off the air. If anything, socialism seems to have accelerated the practice. Recent suicides include Haydée Santamaría, as well as Castro's longtime puppet president Osvaldo Dórticos. The mania has even spread to Latin leftists resident in Castro's Cuba: both the daughter and sister of Chilean president Salvador Allende did away with themselves in the late Seventies, the former by pistol-shot, the latter by heaving herself off the sixteenth story of her apartment building. The current suicide rate in Cuba is now 21.6 per 100,000 persons, twice that of the United States, and, according to 1980 figures published by the Cuban Ministry of the Interior, it is the principal cause of death for all Cubans between the ages of fifteen and forty-five. With all that health and education Castro seems to be dispensing, something is obviously wrong, particularly when people so fortunately placed within the system find it necessary to do away with themselves.

No writer of Spanish prose in the twentieth century has made such stunning innovations in the language, particularly through the coining of puns. In this translation, in which the author has had a hand, some of them pass into English with astonishing celerity. He is also particularly good at epigrams. Here are just a few examples. The newspaper of the Communist youth movement, *Juventud Rebelde* (*Rebel Youth*), "should be called *Obedient Dotage*." "The contradictions of Communism: Havana is again a paradise only for tourists." "You cannot call Cuba a tyranny because it is a Third World country. In the Third World tyrannies are always called developing countries, and the crimes the tyrants commit are mere *accidents de parcours*, as the French so elegantly put it." "Cuban Communism: Stalinism with sun." "Castro has said, 'History will absolve me.'" "Yes," Cabrera replies, "but geography condemns you."

For those unfamiliar with Cuban history, this book will at times prove a difficult and complicated read. But the moment when the commissars and their foreign friends no longer decide what passes for culture and art on the island is not far distant. (This book is an excellent corrective to the recent, embarrassing article on the Cuban literary scene which Murray Kempton produced for *The New York Review of Books*.) Cabrera Infante's essays provide a proper point of departure for a new Cuban cultural history. At the same time, in their author's pointed confrontation with Western fellow-travelers great and small, they add to the rich literature of political idiocy in the twentieth century.

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Notebook

Iris Origo

by Louis Auchincloss

Henry James wrote of the Brontë sisters:

> The romantic tradition of the Brontës, with posterity, has been still more essentially helped, I think, by a force independent of any one of their applied faculties—by the attendant image of their dreary, their tragic history, their loneliness and poverty of life.

The personal position of the three sisters, in short, had become the very tone of their united production.

In somewhat the same fashion the privileged position of Iris Origo (1902–1988) has become a part of her literary work. It is as rare as it is wonderful to see a person, born and bred with every advantage—educational, personal, financial, and social—use each advantage to its fullest capacity. Origo was like the man in the parable who turned his five talents into ten.

She was the only child of Bayard Cutting, a sensitive and intellectual American millionaire, who died young of tuberculosis (her one disadvantage) and left her a fortune. The Cuttings were old New York, but, unlike the denizens of Edith Wharton's age of innocence, they were a family of cultivation and artistic tastes. Origo's grandmother, Olivia Murray Cutting, in her extreme old age, told the writer of this piece, then young, of a summer in the White Mountains in 1865 when she had wanted to go for a hike with three young men who were visiting her family. Her father protested that they didn't want the company of a little girl, but one of them insisted: "Oh, let her come," and she went. The three young men were William and Henry James and the future justice, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

Origo's mother was English, Lady Sybil Cuffe, the daughter of an Irish peer, the Earl of Desart, a witty and talented woman but self-centered and demanding and something of a *malade imaginaire*. The young Cuttings lived much on the continent of Europe in a vain search for places favorable to Bayard's health, and little Iris was later to pay a price for her multilingual education. If her mother on a train journey smelled cigar smoke, Iris would be sent to seek out the culprit.

She described one such incident in her memoirs, *Images and Shadows* (1970).

> "Darling, I am sure I smelled a cigar. *Would* you mind explaining to the man—no, not in the next carriage, I think it must be three or four doors off—that I am very delicate . . ."
>
> I did mind. I minded so much that I would stand outside the offender's compartment praying for an accident before I had to go in.
>
> "I am so sorry but my mother . . ." "*Scusi tanto, ma mia Madre . . .*" "*Verzeihen Sie . . .*" "*Veuillez m'excuser . . .*"
>
> Sometimes my interlocutor was nice about it, and sometimes not. If he went on smoking, I would hurry back to our compartment, shut the door, hand my mother a book, and retreat in silent prayer that she would not notice, but in vain. A few minutes later:

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"Darling, I don't think you *can* have explained yourself properly. Would you call the conductor?"

I wished that I were dead.

Origo escaped the maternal demands, at least partially, when she made an early and happy marriage to an Italian marchese, Antonio Origo, and together they managed a vast tract of farms near Florence, with winters in Rome. Iris was not only a successful wife and mother, and an efficient estate manager; she became a Greek and Latin scholar, a historical researcher, a heroine in the war, and the author of a series of beautiful books.

It did not look, however, as if such a future awaited her when she was a lonely fatherless child isolated in the splendor of the Villa Medici in Fiesole, which her mother had bought and in which she gave constant parties that could hardly include a small daughter. But a good friend intervened to save her.

> At the age of twelve . . . a piece of great good fortune befell me. Bernard Berenson, to whom I shall always be grateful, advised my mother to let me receive a classical education and even supplied her with the name of the brilliant tutor with whom I worked for the next three years, Professor Solone Monti. It was with him that I spent the happiest hours of my girlhood—perhaps the happiest I have ever known.

And then Virgil came into her life.

> For the first time I became aware of poetry as something not disconnected from life, but incorporated in it, and also realised how profoundly the classical tradition was still rooted in the Mediterranean world—transmitted not only in the cadences of words but in nature itself and in the most familiar objects of daily use. As I looked around me, there was nothing in sight that Virgil himself might not have seen: the olive-trees and figs and vines, the fat-bellied gourd trailing in the grass, the single clump of lilies beside the farm door, the pungent thyme beneath our feet, the oxen plodding slowly home, the goat . . . even the wooden flails leaning against one of the walls of the amphitheatre, the small curved sickle with which a bare-armed, dark-skinned girl was cutting a bundle of grass and the round bee-hives placed, as the poet advised, beside a little channel of running water.

Iris was safe now. She would always have the world of letters.

War in Val d'Orcia (1947), which is probably Origo's most widely read book, differs from her other work in that it involves neither scholarship nor art but is simply the exact transcript of the journal that she kept in the years 1943–44, when the Origos' farms near Florence were the scene of continuous warfare. The Germans had given up the south of Italy, but they were determined to hold the north against the invading allied armies; the Origos had to deal with their officers in order to keep the latters' appropriation of vital supplies to a minimum so that the land could support and feed the dozens of tenants who lived on it and the refugee families from bombed-out areas who poured into every barn or structure available. Their task was not made easier by their decision to give aid, at constant risk of their and their two baby daughters' lives, to the many men hiding in their woods and hills: escaped allied prisoners of war, Italian youths avoiding the draft of their disintegrating pro-German government, and anti-Fascist partisans who recklessly sniped at Germans without regard for the hideous reprisals taken on the civilian population.

In part to preserve her own balance and sanity, Origo kept a journal of her weekly activities, hiding it away at night among the books in the nursery. It is a thrilling story. We read of Germans who were cultivated and almost charming, of Germans who were fanatically Nazi to the end, and of Germans who were simply brutes. We read of Fascists who were viler than the vilest German, of spies and sadists. We read of peasants who risked their lives daily to hide British soldiers

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of whose nation and war effort they knew nothing. And what is perhaps most fascinating of all is the twisted picture of the war on other fronts as it filtered into this isolated area: the rumors of devastating new German weapons, the desolate tales of refugees, the constant whispers of terrible defeats or incredible victories, the snatched bits of radio news, the threats and boasts of the jittery occupying forces.

And at last, unbelievably, it was over. The first British troops arrived. The friendly, assured, familiar sound of an English voice—the tone of Albion, sanity in the midst of madness—accosted the ears of the secret journalist. "Are you Marchesa Origo? The whole Eighth Army has been looking for you!"

Returning to her home which had been temporarily vacated as a battle site, Origo found a lost friend.

> I go back into the farm, and there, crouching under a sofa, I see a black shadow. I whistle, and, half incredulously, he crawls out, then leaps upon me in wild delight, and from that minute never leaves my side. It is Gambolino, the poodle, miraculously safe, but pitifully thin, and so nervy that the slightest noise sends him trembling under the nearest bed.

Origo's talents as a biographer found their widest scope in *Leopardi* (1953), where the skillfully edited letters of her subject and her own powerful evocations of small-town Italian life in the first decades of the nineteenth century form a seamless unit. The cloistered, scholastic early existence of the melancholy poet, an undersized and sickly hunchback, in the dreary palazzo of his noble but hard-up parents provides a long and richly detailed prelude to the story of his partial escape into romantic poetry and his ultimate relapse into depression and early death. Origo makes him constantly interesting; she cannot make him appealing.

> Unknown to him were sheer animal exuberance and heedlessness, those gifts of physical well-being which sheathe our nerves with a deceptive sense of false security.

Leopardi himself set this seal on his life:

> I gave myself up entirely to the terrifying and barbarous joy of despair.

Immersed in self-pity, he was not even able, after his escape from his home town, Recanati, in the Papal States on the Adriatic, to join his new friends in Bologna and Florence in their schemes to free Italy from its scourge of petty tyrants. He confined his patriotism to his passionate poetry, which received early acclaim. Mankind, he maintained, occupied too small a space in the universe for him to be concerned with it.

Nor was he attractive, either in his person or his habits. His friends had to put up with "his headaches, his constipation, his insomnia and with his unceasing complaints about the cold, the heat, the light and the noise." He also had an irritating habit of cracking his finger bones (the *crepitus digitorum* of the Romans); his clothes were spotted with food stains, and he insisted on airless dark rooms, for his eyes.

Origo, however, brings out the charm that he could exercise in conversation, and cites his friends' unanimous approval of his "sweet, heavenly smile." And when we learn that his fanatical bigot of a mother was thankful when she lost a young child, who would thus escape adult temptations which might endanger the infant's access to paradise, and that, when Leopardi appeared in the streets of Recanati, he was apt to be greeted by snowballs or stones flung by urchins screaming "Hunchback," we can feel almost as sorry for him as he did for himself.

Indeed, his feelings seem to have been little spared. Niccolo Tommaseo, the Florentine Catholic scholar, summed up the poet's philosophy as: "There's no god because I'm a hunchback; I'm a hunchback because there's no god." Actually, Leopardi seemed at times to question his own agnosticism. As Origo observes: "It is not easy for a man to destroy entirely what has once stirred his spirit, and most men have some hidden altar in their hearts, dedicated to the fallen gods."

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Toward its close the biography has a fine example of how Origo can juxtapose a vivid cityscape with a tart example of Latin crudity to evoke a picture of Italy itself.

> Florence in midsummer becomes a deserted city. Its inhabitants, if they have not been able to escape to the seaside or the neighboring hills, take refuge from the heat behind closed shutters. During the long hours of the afternoon no one dares venture out into the glare of the Lungarno, between the dazzling river and the torrid heat of the sun-baked palazzi. Even in the dark cool avenues of the Cascine no sound breaks the stillness but the strident crackling of the cicadas; the air is heavy with the scent of limes and hazy with white dust. Then, in the tension of that summer heat, every nerve is quivering; every sense becomes more alive than usual, every feeling more intense—and in his room alone the poet dreamed of his Aspasia.

But this Aspasia, his last, Fanny Targioni, came no nearer to succumbing to the sick man's appeals than had any of the others. When, decades later, the young novelist Matilde Serao asked Fanny how she could have resisted so great a romantic poet, the old lady replied: "My dear, he stank."

Origo's most valuable contribution to literary scholarship is *Byron, the Last Attachment* (1949), whose subtitle is "The Story of Byron and Teresa Guiccioli as told by their unpublished letters and other family papers." The documents, long held by the Guiccioli family under lock and key, were made available to Origo by Count Carlo Gama, Teresa's great nephew, and although her editorship is masterly, the bulk of the book is the writing of the two lovers and not a true part of the Origo canon.

Much more of her writing is to be found in *The Merchant of Prato* (1957), which Origo put together out of the remarkably complete archives of one Francesco Datini, a fifteenth-century Italian merchant. There is *nothing of* any particular interest about Datini himself. He was a tough-minded business man, of greater than average imagination, who was willing to take substantial risks in shipping goods abroad over pirate- and storm-infested waters and establishing branches in other towns than his native Prato. He cheated on his always complaining wife and, with surprising patience, put up with the lifelong sermonizing of a priggish letter-writing friend who found him too grossly materialistic. The only really exciting thing about Datini is how much we know about him. His archives contain every detail of his business and private life. He is like one of those preserved figures in the ruins of Pompeii, caught in their death throes. We marvel that he is there.

Origo does not attempt to make him more than he was. She uses him as the window through which we view the whole life of a fifteenth-century community. We see every detail of his house, his household, his slaves, his business transactions, his friends, his religious practices. We have the experience of living in a totally different age.

Origo also wrote a number of biographical essays: among others, on Ruth Draper, Gaetano Salvemini, Thomas and Jane Carlyle, Mazzini, and Allegra, the bastard daughter of Byron and Claire Clairmont, who died at the age of five. These have merit in direct proportion to their chronological distance from the author. When she knows the subject personally, she is too inclined to praise. Her piece on Ruth Draper, the monologist, for example, reads a bit like a funeral oration. But with the Carlyles and their love-hate relationship with the British aristocracy, she is sharp and amusing.

> The snobbishness of Victorian England (and who shall say that it has disappeared?) was not a superficial attitude; it was so deeply ingrained, so universally accepted, so infinitely complicated in its shades and distinctions, as to have become an intrinsic part of every human relationship.

And with poor little Allegra, the subject of bitter fights among parents who rarely saw her, dying at last abandoned in a convent,

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Origo endows her final scene with some of the pathos of the one that Lytton Strachey provided for Queen Victoria.

> Yes, it had been bewildering, the world as she had known it, a world that had contained the formidable capricious personage that was Papa, the Mama who came and went, who kissed and clutched her too hard, the prim, sour Mrs Hoppner, the loud-voiced Fornarina and pretty Teresa, the masked figures at the Ravenna Carnival, and finally the strict, quiet, gentle Capuchin nuns. Now only they were left.

There remains to be mentioned Origo's life of San Bernardino (1962), the fifteenth-century Sienese preacher who assembled mammoth crowds wherever he went and who was revered by emperor and pope as well as the poor and wretched. What was the nature of his gift?

> The outstanding gift which drew so many thousands to hear him, and often changed their lives, was surely one to which Dante had already given a name—*l'intelletto d'amore* (the understanding of love). He understood the men and women to whom he spoke, and he understood them because he loved them.

As the saint put it himself: "You must suffer in your own self the pain of the man who is being hanged. You must feel yourself what Christ felt on the cross."

But here even Iris Origo cannot persuade me to bridge the gap between the eras. I wonder if San Bernardino felt the flames that licked the flesh of the witches and homosexuals whom he helped to send to the stake.

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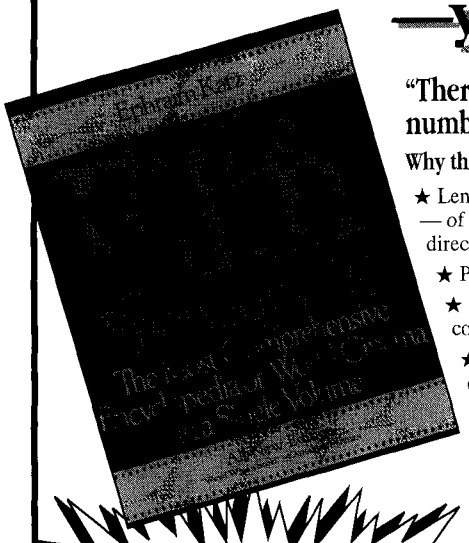

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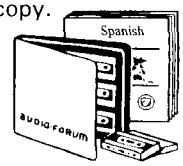

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